

Citizens' initiatives in depopulating rural areas

Understanding success, failure and
continuity from multiple perspectives

Erzsi de Haan



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This research was conducted at the Faculty of Spatial Sciences of the University of Groningen and the Research Centre for Built Environment NoorderRuimte of the Hanze University of Applied Sciences.

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by

Erzsébet Mancy de Haan

born on 19 September 1988
 in Sneek

Supervisors

Prof. T. Haartsen

Prof. S.O. Meier

Prof. D. Strijker

Assessment committee

Prof. B.B. Bock

Prof. S. Skerratt

Prof. E. Tonkens

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Introduction

1.1 Background

Collective action within communities that serves a shared purpose dates far back in history (De Moor 2008). In recent years, financial crises, austerity measures, market failures and the downsizing of welfare states have spurred growing interest in the topic of citizens' participation. Whereas central governments previously decided how budgets were to be spent and assumed responsibility for many aspects of the living environment of citizens, this responsibility is now increasingly being transferred to or taken up by regional or local governments. Furthermore, citizens are invited—or initiate actions themselves—to take over these responsibilities from local and regional governments (Tonkens 2006). The so-called 'localism agenda', entailing a shift in organizational focus from the central government at the national scale towards the local level, has received increasing attention (Jones and Ormston 2014; Lowndes and Sullivan 2008).

Throughout Western societies, these changes have occurred alongside the shift from 'Big Government' to 'Big Society' (Kampen et al. 2013; König 2015; Lowndes and Pratchett 2012; Tonkens 2009). In light of the need for austerity measures, the underlying expectation is that more active participation of citizens will contribute to the efficiency of the local public domain. A similar trend, described as a transition towards the 'participation society' (Movisie 2017), is evident within Dutch society, where withdrawal of the (central) state both necessitates and provides more opportunities for an enhanced role of regional and local governments and for citizen participation. The 'participation society' was first introduced officially in 2013 (Central Government 2013) and has since taken shape gradually. Accordingly, citizens have been requested and offered an opportunity to be more responsible for their own physical living environments as well as related domains such as health, digitalization, social wellbeing and public transport. This changing context, entailing more active citizen participation, implies a change in role patterns, responsibilities and power relations for both citizens and governments. Moreover, it has been argued that this shift entails greater empowerment of citizens because they are increasingly having more say over their living environments and have acquired the 'right to challenge' under the assumption of better being able to provide a service compared to a government institution (Espejo and Bendek 2011; Jones and Ormston 2014; Steiner and Farmer 2017; Verhoeven and Tonkens 2013). Within the participation society, citizens' initiatives are a specific form of bottom-up movement in which individuals avail of the opportunity to take the lead in managing their living environments.

The research topic examined in this thesis is citizens' initiatives in depopulating rural areas of the Netherlands. Although citizens' initiatives emerge within varying spatial settings, active participation of citizens appears to be subject to different processes and expectations in rural areas compared with those in metropolitan areas (Gielsing & Haartsen 2017; van Houwelingen et al. 2014; Syssner and Meijer 2017). For example, compared with urban dwellers, people in rural settings are

more often active as volunteers and have more contact with their neighbours (Steenbekkers et al. 2006), which can influence how citizens' initiatives function in a rural context. Moreover, active participation can assume greater urgency in rural areas (Gielsing and Haartsen 2017; Syssner and Meijer 2017) because of changes such as (projected) depopulation, ageing, digital exclusion, school closures, unemployment, underemployment, high mobility costs, changing consumption demands and an expanded scale. These kinds of changes can have a stronger impact on rural areas compared with urban areas (Copus et al. 2011; Salemink 2016; Skerratt 2010; Steiner and Atterton 2014; Woods 2006). Moreover, there is some evidence that instances of communities taking over what were formerly (local) government tasks are more frequent in rural settings than in urban settings (Syssner and Meijer 2017).

Three types of citizens' initiatives that provide services and facilities can be distinguished. The first type includes initiatives in which citizens have availed of the opportunity to provide a service that has disappeared, or is on the verge of disappearing, as a result of the central state's withdrawal. An example of this kind of initiative is the maintenance of public green spaces, such as parks (Sellick 2014). A second type of citizens' initiative involving service delivery entails the takeover of existing facilities or services that were not government-initiated; for example, the maintenance of a village shop (Calderwood and Davies 2013; Meijer 2018). The third type of citizens' initiative entails the provision of a new type of service or facility at the outset. An example is the provision of internet access using a broadband connection or sustainable energy that has not previously been available in the region (Ashmore et al. 2014; Salemink 2016; Van Der Schoor and Scholtens 2015).

The participation of citizens in these three types of service delivery is presumed to be essential for attuning the service to local needs and could possibly lead to the provision of higher quality services (Bock 2016; Boonstra and Boelens 2011; Healey 2015). Thus, citizens' initiatives are believed to have the potential to enable the quality of life, or the liveability of rural communities, to be maintained and enhanced (Syssner and Meijer 2017). Liveability, which is itself a contested concept, can be understood as the extent to which the living environment is aligned with the needs and desires of the inhabitants (Leidemeijer and van Kamp 2003). However, demonstrating the existence of a direct relationship between the availability of services and liveability, and between participation and liveability, is a challenging task (Gielsing 2018). Nevertheless, there seems to be a consensus about the importance of meeting, collaborating and expanding networks of (rural) inhabitants to foster and strengthen a sense of community and liveability. Therefore, the focus in this thesis is on citizens' initiatives that are intended to play a role in the provision of services and facilities as well as on initiatives aimed at contributing to the liveability of the respective village or neighbourhood.

The shift towards the ‘participation society’ in relation to service provision in rural areas has seemingly generated debates around three central issues: democracy, accessibility and continuity. Edelenbos et al. (2017) distinguished three models of *democracy*: representative, participatory and self-organizing. Representative democracy refers to the traditional welfare state model, which is based on the premise of the representativeness of citizens, given that governments are elected through voting. Participatory democracy entails the active participation of citizens in decision making as well as policy formulation. A self-organizing democracy also entails the active participation of citizens. However, participation does not take place on the government’s terms; instead, citizens have the power and opportunity to implement their own plans and ideas. Citizens’ initiatives within the ‘participation society’ seem to fit best with the self-organizing democracy. They are not necessarily representative in terms of elections, but they do entail an agenda-setting power and can raise issues that are important for communities (Tonkens and Verhoeven 2018). In most cases, the participants in citizens’ initiatives are highly skilled and highly educated individuals who are thus overrepresented. Therefore, they do not represent all of the interests within a community. Furthermore, not every community is engaged in this type of participation (Salemink 2016; Skerratt and Steiner 2013). There are communities that lack the ability or willingness to start citizens’ initiatives, potentially resulting in growing disparities in levels of service delivery.

There may also be differences in the *accessibility* of services arising from existing differences among communities and whether or not they have developed citizens’ initiatives. Skerratt (2010, p. 1737) described how ‘hot spots’, that is, communities with services, and ‘not spots’, or communities lacking these services, can emerge in rural areas when service delivery is contingent on community participation, for example, in the form of citizens’ initiatives. This situation can lead to increasing inequality among rural regions, exclusion from services and ultimately uneven rural development (Ashmore et al. 2014; Salemink 2016).

Continuity plays a role in relation to the potential of citizens’ initiatives to serve as an alternative for otherwise disappearing services (whether or not these services were formerly state-led). Thus far, the extent to which citizens’ initiatives can function as a long-term alternative in the area of service provision remains unclear. The continuity of citizens’ initiatives can be distinguished at different levels: participant, group and initiative. At the level of participants, individual members of an initiative can continue with or halt their activities, for example, because they have other priorities or are experiencing volunteer burnout (Allen and Mueller 2013; Salemink 2016). At the group level, it is necessary for all members of a group of initiators to cooperate for the initiative to be sustained. Moreover, leadership and decision-making skills as well as social capital are required for its continuity (Brandsen and Helderman 2012; Jicha et al. 2011; Lambriu and Petrescu 2016; Liu and Besser 2003). At the level of the initiative, the participation of group members may change over time, but the initiative itself can endure and be successful. All of the above

levels of continuity are contingent on the efforts of individual members of the initiatives. Insights into the continuity of citizens' initiatives and their role in rural service provision would make a valuable contribution to policy and practice, given the potential risks resulting from participation in a citizens' initiative. These risks include the aforementioned volunteer burnout (Allen and Mueller 2013; Salemink 2016) and accountability (David et al. 2013; Flinders and Moon 2011; Sellick 2014) as well as exclusion of individuals outside of the initiatives (Ashmore et al. 2014; Salemink 2016; Skerratt 2010).

A situation in which citizens are willing to assume responsibility for their living environment by providing services would necessitate changes in role patterns and power relations between citizens and government institutions, such as the latter's relinquishment of their former responsibilities (van Houwelingen et al. 2014; Sellick 2014). In light of changing responsibilities, role patterns and power relations, the relationship between governments and citizens' initiatives is an important consideration. Citizens' initiatives generally depend to a large extent on funding or other forms of support provided by governments (Nederhand et al. 2016). In order to acquire these funds or resources, the specific requirements of governments often have to be met. This implies that citizens have to take responsibility for their initiatives while simultaneously complying with the requirements of local and regional governments. Research indicates that citizens' initiatives that are aligned with existing government policies have higher chances of success (Li et al. 2016). However, this alignment constrains the freedom of the initiatives to pursue their own course of action. Therefore, even when it seems that responsibilities have changed and shifted, dependence on governments could still persist, thereby complicating the relationship between governments and citizens' initiatives. Meijer (2016) refers to this situation as an institutional misfit in which required role changes associated with the 'participation society' have not yet been put into practise. Thus, it would appear that much remains to be done to achieve the realization of a society in which citizens are more responsible for their own lives and living environments (Movisie 2017).

1.2 Research aim and questions

Governments are responsible for encouraging the replacement of services and facilities that are under pressure, have disappeared or have not materialized through citizens' initiatives (Bock 2016; Calderwood and Davies 2013; Herbert-Cheshire and Higgins 2004; Munoz et al. 2015; Salemink and Strijker 2016). However, little is currently known about what the success and continuity of citizens' initiatives actually entails and how they can be enabled. Given the context discussed in the previous section, a central aim of this thesis was to examine the success, failure and continuity of citizens' initiatives in depopulating rural areas, exploring how these concepts are perceived by various stakeholders and the role of citizens' initiatives

within the ‘participation society’. The main research question of the study was as follows: *How can citizens’ initiatives be described and understood in terms of success, failure and continuity in its local context of depopulation in rural areas?* This central question was addressed through four sub-research questions.

The first of these questions, (RQ 1), focused on the conceptualization of success and failure from the perspective of professionals and was formulated as follows: *How can the success and failure of citizens’ initiatives be defined?* To date, few studies have attempted to conceptualize the success and failure of citizens’ initiatives. Many studies have identified factors that influence their success and failure, such as skills, networks, social capital and leadership (Nowell and Boyd 2014; Munoz et al. 2015; Salemink and Strijker 2016; Taló et al. 2014). However, the conceptualization of both the success and the failure of citizens’ initiatives has not been attempted within these studies. An understanding of success and failure is a starting point for the further exploration of the factors influencing both, and, as such, contributes to successful citizens’ initiatives.

The second research question, (RQ 2), relates to the perceptions of the initiators regarding factors influencing the success and failure of citizens’ initiatives as follows: *Which factors contribute to the success and failure of citizens’ initiatives?* Adequate support for citizens’ initiatives requires an understanding of their mechanisms which ultimately contribute to effective service provision in depopulating rural areas. Whereas previous studies have identified factors influencing the success and failure of citizens’ initiatives, in this study, existing insights were combined with an investigation of the perspectives of the initiators themselves. Furthermore, success was also conceptualized from the perspective of the initiators. Insights into how success and failure can be understood and which factors influence them illustrate how citizens’ initiatives work and how they can be facilitated.

The third research question, (RQ 3), focused on continuity from the perspective of initiators. For citizens’ initiatives to become a stable alternative in service provision, their continuity is also a salient factor. The development of citizens’ initiatives as a long-term alternative to government-provided services in rural areas requires an understanding of the factors that influence their continuity as well as those pertaining to their success and failure, which can contribute to the provision of more fine-tuned support of such initiatives. Thus, RQ 3 was formulated as follows: *Which factors influence the continuity of citizens’ initiatives?*

The fourth and final research question, (RQ 4), relates to failure. A review of the existing body of literature on citizens’ initiatives reveals an emphasis on the success stories of citizens’ initiatives (Meijer 2017). Nonetheless, it is important to look at failed citizens’ initiatives as well to identify the stages in the process where things can go wrong and to determine how these issues can be prevented in the future. Thus, RQ 4 was formulated as follows: *Which processes contribute to the failure of citizens’ initiatives?*

1.3 Defining the concept of citizens' initiatives

Against the backdrop of depopulation and the 'participation society', active citizens have increasingly received attention within academic debates. Even though citizens' cooperation to attain a shared goal has occurred throughout history (De Moor 2008), citizens' initiatives refer to a specific form of active citizenship in which citizens themselves take the initiative to achieve a certain goal in the public domain that could otherwise have been organized by a government institution or by a commercial enterprise. Citizens' initiatives are not simply about participation, as they include more than just engagement with local governments and having a say in policy or decision making (May 2007). Citizens' initiatives entail the active adoption and implementation of goals that contribute to the public domain, such as organizing meeting places or maintaining a supermarket or library in a rural village. Several concepts that are used to refer to forms of active citizenship overlap in their meanings, such as social innovation, social enterprises, social cooperatives, neo-endogenous developments and grassroots initiatives (Ayob et al. 2016; Bock 2016; Bosworth et al. 2015; Brandsen and Helderman 2012; Fazzi 2011; Kelly and Caputo 2006; Montgomery et al. 2012; Shucksmith 2010; Teasdale 2012).

Although the concepts of social innovation and citizens' initiatives both entail collective action, their meanings differ. Even though there is no agreement on a uniform definition of social innovation (Neumeier 2012), this can be understood as '*a motor of change rooted in social collaboration and social learning, the response to unmet social needs as a desirable outcome*' (Bock 2016, p. 4). Central to the concept of social innovation is the creation of new ways of innovating society. Differing from social innovation, citizens' initiatives are not specifically formed to foster new ideas and relationships. Therefore, social innovation can be part of a citizens' initiative when the initiative includes innovative ways of addressing unmet social needs, but this is not a necessity.

Citizens' initiatives also share the notion of collective action with social enterprises and social cooperatives, which are a type of social enterprise (Fazzi 2011; Montgomery et al. 2012; Teasdale 2012). Although the concept of social enterprises is contested (Teasdale 2012), in general it can be understood as '*collaboration amongst similar as well as diverse actors for the purpose of applying business principles to solving social problems*' (Montgomery et al. 2012, p. 376). Accordingly, citizens' initiatives can be understood as a type of social enterprise but with the following proviso: citizens' initiatives always comprise citizens. Whereas other parties may be involved in the initiative, they are not founding members, as would be the case for social enterprises.

Citizens' initiatives also share commonalities with neo-endogenous development, such as being bottom-up movements that focus on the local scale. Neo-endogenous rural development centres on '*bottom-up*' activities that integrate external

influences to increase local potential' (Bosworth et al. 2015, p. 427). Citizens' initiatives depart from neo-endogenous development, given that they do not necessarily entail partnerships with the government or long-term cooperation with social actors outside of the initiative. However, the involvement of a local or regional government in a citizens' initiative is possible and frequently occurs in practise through the provision of financial support. Another example of government involvement is its support of initiatives through the provision of expert knowledge.

Citizens' initiatives seem to share the highest level of commonality with grassroots initiatives. Traditionally, grassroots initiatives were mostly associated with political activism (Grabs et al. 2016). Nowadays, however, grassroots initiatives also play a role in community development (Kelly and Caputo 2006) and can be understood as a *'collaborative social undertaking that is organized at the local community level, has a high degree of participatory decision-making and flat hierarchies'* (Grabs et al. 2016, p. 100). Similar to grassroots initiatives, citizens' initiatives entail community-based collaboration between volunteers, who aim to make changes that will benefit members of the community (Connors 2010; Grabs et al. 2016; Kelly and Caputo 2006). Both types of initiatives require the capacity to mobilize necessary resources within the community. Furthermore, both can include hard assets (physical structures) as well as soft assets (community service) that are adapted to local needs (ibid.). Even though the composition of both types of initiatives is confined to community members, citizens' initiatives distinguish themselves through their strong focus on the public domain and the different organizational forms that they can assume. Moreover, the flat hierarchy found within grassroots initiatives is not a prerequisite for citizens' initiatives, thereby enabling citizens' initiatives to take up more complex tasks. In this thesis, the following definition of citizens' initiatives is used: *formally or informally organised groups of citizens who are active and contribute to the public domain on a voluntary basis without financial compensation.*

Changes in roles and responsibilities occur when citizens' initiatives take over formerly public tasks (Van Meerkerk et al. 2013). Nevertheless, governments and citizens' initiatives remain in a strong interdependent relationship in most cases (Edelenbos et al. 2016) for reasons that include accountability (Flinders and Moon 2011; Jones and Ormston 2014), funding (Verhoeven and Tonkens 2011), existing policies (Nederhand et al. 2016) and opposing interests (Salemink and Strijker 2018). In a study that examined the interdependencies between citizens and government institutions, Kuindersma et al. (2012) highlighted the importance of power relations. Power refers to the extent to which an individual is able to carry out their will, despite (potential) resistance (Parsons and Henderson 1965). In addition to having power over material resources, it includes the abilities to set agendas and determine social-economic structures as well as to develop ideas and perspectives (Kuindersma et al. 2012). To better understand the relationships existing between governments and citizens, it is necessary to understand how these power relations are filled-in in practice (ibid.). Aarts et al. (2010) showed that there was a lack of clarity regarding the roles and functions of citizens and governments

within the ‘participation society’. They further pointed to the need to establish a new balance in accountability and responsibility. Power relations matter for citizens’ initiatives because they determine whether these initiatives can take control in relation to certain topics. An understanding of these power relations and interdependencies is also important when considering who decides on what the desired outcomes of citizens’ initiatives should be, and, thus, what success and failure entail.

1.4 Methods and data

This thesis examines the factors and aspects that influence the success, failure and continuity of citizens’ initiatives and the mechanisms through which they do so. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were applied in the study, which was conducted in three northern provinces of the Netherlands. Dutch rural areas are not as remote as comparative areas in other EU member countries. Thus, the rural Dutch setting is representative of intermediate rural areas located within the vicinity of urban areas. Compared with urban areas, such areas are less densely populated and face a prospective population decline (see Figure 1). Moreover, levels of community participation are higher in these areas than they are in urban areas (CBS n.d.; Haartsen and Venhorst 2010; van Houwelingen et al. 2014). The patterns revealed in this study could also have implications beyond the Dutch context, given that similar expectations of greater self-reliance and more active participation of citizens prevail outside of this context. A mix of methods was applied to obtain an overview of the citizens’ initiatives examined in the study areas.

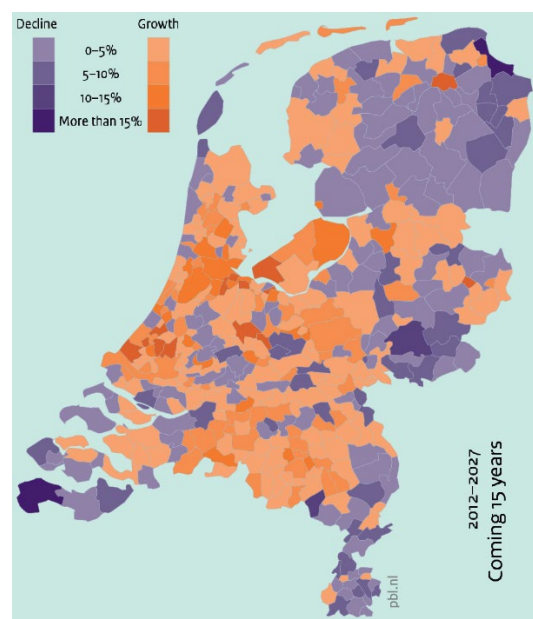


Figure 1: Expected population decline in the Netherlands
(Source: CBS & PBL)

First, a focus group discussion was organized to conceptualize the success of citizens' initiatives. Three focus group discussions involving professionals with expertise on citizens' initiatives were held, each lasting two hours on average. A total of 23 professionals participated in the focus group discussions. For each session, three discussion rounds were conducted to build the understanding of the concept of success. During round one, preliminary thoughts on success were framed. The findings of the first round were then discussed and further elaborated during the second round. During the final round, conclusions relating to the discussions from the first two rounds were formulated, discussed and confirmed.

Following the focus group discussions, a questionnaire was distributed among groups of citizens that had implemented initiatives in three northern provinces of the Netherlands where depopulation has occurred or is expected to occur in the future. Subsequently, the data from these questionnaires were compiled. Before sending out this questionnaire, an inventory of citizens' initiatives was created based on information obtained from local and regional governments, planning bureaus and through an internet search for citizens' initiatives in the study area. The snowball sampling method was then applied to identify initiatives operating outside of the scope of the above information sources. Subsequently, a database comprising 623 initiatives was constructed, with contact details available for 585 of them. The questionnaire was administered among these 585 initiatives and was completed by representatives of 157 of them, resulting in a response rate of 26.8%. The questionnaire was developed around two themes: success and continuity. The initiators of the citizens' initiatives were asked to answer questions about the possible factors that influence their initiatives' success and continuity and to evaluate expectations of the continuity of their initiative and its performance.

The third step entailed the conduct of three case studies focusing on citizens' initiatives that were perceived as failures by the initiators. In-depth interviews were held with these initiators but also with professionals who played a role with the initiatives in a different role. A semi-structured interview format was used to discuss the processes that led to the failure of the initiatives. The data collection was supplemented by information drawn from other sources, such as the initiatives' websites, minutes of meetings, project plan documents and policy documents.

1.5 Outline

Chapters 2–5 comprise the core section of this thesis, with each of these chapters separately addressing one of the four research questions of the study. Chapter 2 addresses RQ 1 and conceptualizes the success and failure of citizens' initiatives. The focus in this chapter is on the perspectives of professionals on the concept of success. Their collective understanding of success and failure was constructed through focus group discussions. The professionals included government officials as well as professionals working with citizens' initiatives in the field.

The inclusion of various perspectives in the analysis was necessary to understand and formulate the concept of success. Therefore, the initiators' perspectives on success are examined in Chapters 3 to 5. Chapter 3 elaborates on the framework of success developed in Chapter 2 and explores the initiators' perspectives on the concept of success by applying principal component analysis. Furthermore, RQ 2 is addressed in Chapter 3, and factors that influence the self-evaluated success of citizens' initiatives are identified. A model to predict self-evaluated success is derived from the performance of regression analysis based on the data from the questionnaire distributed to citizens' initiatives. In addition, the different perspectives of professionals and initiators concerning the concept of success are discussed in Chapter 3.

Chapter 4, which is aimed at addressing RQ 3, focuses on continuity. It provides insights on the expectations that initiators have regarding the continuity of their initiatives. It presents the results of a regression analysis on expected continuity based on data obtained from the questionnaire on citizens' initiatives. This analysis revealed which factors influence the expected continuity of citizens' initiatives. Moreover, the roles that citizens' initiatives can play in service provision and their relation to continuity are explored.

Chapter 5, which is aimed at addressing RQ 4, examines the processes that contribute to the failure of citizens' initiatives. The findings of three case studies of citizens' initiatives which were perceived as failures by their initiators and for which 15 semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted are presented. An integral approach for examining the process of failure was adopted. In light of six obstacles that these initiatives may encounter, as revealed through a review of the literature on citizens' initiatives, this chapter examines how these obstacles constitute part of the entire process of perceived failure and how this process is shaped by other influences.

Chapter 6, which is the final chapter of this thesis, combines the findings and insights derived from the preceding chapters to formulate general conclusions. In addition, the implications of the findings of this study for policy are explored.

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*Defining 'Success' of Local Citizens'
Initiatives in Maintaining Public Services in
Rural Areas: A Professional's Perspective*

2

Abstract

In the shift towards the Big Society, it is widely proclaimed that citizen participation and citizens' initiatives are indispensable to maintaining services that used to be run by local or regional governments. Despite the increased interest in citizens' initiatives, research has scarcely debated what actually defines the success of such initiatives. Using focus group discussions, this study examined the meanings and norms collectively constructed by government officials and professionals regarding the success and failure of citizens' initiatives in rural areas. Remarkably, we found that the professional perspective of successful citizens' initiatives was not dominated by the achievement of actual policy targets or project goals, such as maintaining public services. Rather, an initiative was perceived as successful as long as citizens are continuously active and in charge. Arguably, this somewhat paternalistic professional view of successful citizens' initiatives could be challenged by the volunteers in those initiatives.

2.1 Introduction

Citizens have contributed to their communities in both urban and rural contexts as far back as the late Middle Ages (De Moor 2008), and infinite examples of citizens volunteering can be found (Weisbrod 1977; Zeleny 1979; Bloom and Kilgore 2003; Sellick 2014). Today, in the western world, citizens' initiatives attract considerable interest (Dekker and van den Broek 1998; Fyfe and Milligan 2003; Bailey and Pill 2015; Bock 2016). Transferring responsibilities from governments to citizens, the transition from 'Big Government' to 'Big Society' has spread throughout Europe, including the Netherlands (Tonkens 2009; Lowndes and Pratchett 2012; Kampen et al. 2013; Konig 2015). In the Netherlands, this transition is also referred to as the shift towards the 'Participation Society' (Central Government 2013), in which citizens are expected to become more active in resolving societal issues (Tonkens 2006; Houweligen et al. 2014; Sellick 2014). The Participation Society has followed from the restructuring of the welfare state and austerity measures, which have required and advocated more active citizen participation. Transferring the responsibility for their living environment, and therefore service provision, to citizens has led to a discussion on role change where (local) governments relinquish responsibilities and citizens attain more influence.

In many European rural areas, the shift towards the Participation Society has coincided with an ageing and declining population, which has caused governments to struggle to maintain public services. The centralisation of services often appears to be a solution to this problem, but it leads to the relocation and closure of services (Dam et al. 2006; Woods 2006; Van Steen and Pellenbarg 2010). Citizens' initiatives are often proposed as alternative solutions to address threatened government service provision or the closure of facilities (Jones and Little 2000; Shucksmith et al. 2006; Cheshire and Woods 2009; Healey 2015). In addition to meeting the everyday needs of the inhabitants of rural areas, such initiatives contribute to enhancing the sense of community (Simon et al. 2007; Vermeij and Mollenhorst 2008; Brereton et al. 2011; Oude Vrielink and Verhoeven 2011; Leidelmeijer 2012; Bailey and Pill 2015).

The consequences of the Participation Society with regard to the new roles of citizens is a widely researched topic and includes various conceptualisations of essentially the same phenomenon, such as community-led local development initiatives, grassroots initiatives, social innovation, bottom-up social enterprise and social cooperatives (Kelly and Caputo 2006; Fazzi 2011; Brandsen and Helderman 2012; Bosworth et al. 2015; Bock 2016; Li et al. 2016). We use the term citizens' initiatives in this paper, defining them as *formally or informally organised groups of citizens who are active and contribute to the public domain*. Citizens' initiatives differ from citizen participation, which refers to citizens' involvement in local governance (May 2007). By citizens' initiatives, we mean projects in which citizens take the initiative to actively achieve a specific goal together, such as preventing the closure of a local supermarket, maintaining public green areas or creating a small local housing

corporation (Brannan et al. 2006; Rosol 2012; Calderwood and Davies 2013). In such initiatives, the main objective of citizens is to replace an existing facility or prevent one from disappearing.

Due to the changing roles resulting from the Participation Society, local and regional governments have a political interest in supporting successful initiatives. However, our understanding of what makes a citizens' initiative successful (or the reverse, what makes it unsuccessful) is limited. Thus far, few studies have attempted to explore how the success of citizens' initiatives is conceptualised. Studies on the performance of similar organisations, such as public networks, emphasise their complexity (Herranz 2010). Several scholars have worked towards an abstract understanding of success in the area of community participation (e.g., Wandersman 2009; Calderwood and Davies 2013; Bosworth et al. 2015) but have left the specific context of citizens' initiatives unaddressed. The conditions and indicators of success are also well described in the literature (Nowell and Boyd 2014; Tal'o et al. 2014; Munoz et al. 2015; Salemink and Strijker 2016), but these studies do not examine how success is conceptualised.

We believe that it is relevant to investigate how the success and failure of citizens' initiatives can be conceptualised from various perspectives to ensure that initiators and local and regional governments are on the same level of understanding. In this paper, we specifically focus on the perspective of government officials and professionals to gain an understanding of how they conceive successful citizens' initiatives. Success requires that citizens' initiatives, policy and development plans be attuned (Li et al. 2016), including the expectations between and among stakeholders. These expectations are based on stakeholders' perceptions of success. The perspectives of government officials and professionals are important since they decide on policy related to citizens' initiatives or must work with and facilitate them.

This study was conducted in rural areas in the northern Netherlands. There are more citizens' initiatives in rural areas than urban areas in the Netherlands because of the pressure that population decline places on the number and quality of facilities and services (Houwelingen et al. 2014). Although population decline figures are generally lower in the Netherlands than in more traditional depopulating rural areas in Europe, Dutch planners and policymakers do feel a sense of urgency to develop strategies and plan for decline (Haartsen and Venhorst 2010). We will start our paper with a review of the literature on the conditions and indicators of initiatives' success. Then, we will discuss the research method, which used focus groups of professionals from local and regional governments, planning offices and housing corporations. The results section will present the various ways in which these Dutch professionals collectively constructed norms and values regarding the success and failure of citizens' initiatives. In the concluding discussion, we compare the views of the professionals with the existing body of literature.

2.2 Conditions and indicators of success

As discussed in the introduction, research has scarcely examined the question of what defines a successful citizens' initiative. We therefore theorise success based on literature that focuses on the conditions for and indicators of success for citizen participation or projects comparable to citizens' initiatives. Provan and Milward's (2001) model for evaluating the effectiveness of public service delivery networks offers a good point of departure for understanding the conceptualisation of success. Although their model is aimed at networks of multiple organisations and we focus on singular initiatives, evaluating their performance reveals parallels. Citizens' initiatives are usually part of a greater network, and their activities are characterised by working together (within the initiative) and working with other parties (outside the initiative). Provan and Milward also indicated that evaluating networks addresses the same issues as evaluating a single organisation within a network.

Provan and Milward (2001) argued that effectiveness should be measured at three levels: community, network and organisation/participant. Community-level effectiveness refers to the contribution of the public service delivery network to the community. Network effectiveness refers to the interorganisational relationships that must be present for the network to be sustainable. Finally, joining the network should benefit individual agents. According to Provan and Milward, effectiveness at all three levels of analysis should be achieved for a network as a whole to be effective.

Provan and Milward's framework (2001) was extended by the work of Herranz (2010). He argued that the types of organisations in a network (i.e., public, non-profit or for-profit) influence the behaviour of organisations and networks as a whole and thus determine their (un)successful performance. Therefore, organisation type should be considered in performance evaluations. Herranz distinguished among three types of organisational strategic orientation: bureaucratic, entrepreneurial and community. Citizens' initiatives are considered organisations with a community strategy. To further develop our theoretical understanding of success, we compared the literature on the conditions for success and the performance of various types of citizens' initiatives based on the three levels of effectiveness distinguished by Provan and Milward (Table 1).

2.2.1 *Community-level effectiveness*

While community-level effectiveness is determined by output, it is also determined by the needs within a community. Herranz (2010) related community-level effectiveness with output using job replacement rates and perceived service integration as indicators. He found that job replacement has a low influence on

initiatives' success. No other studies on citizens' initiatives had examined this relationship. This finding is not unexpected considering the voluntary nature of participating within an initiative and the goals of an initiative. However, he found a relationship between initiatives' success and the perceived service integration indicator. This indicator attracted more support in the literature than Herranz's other indicators.

Table 1: Theoretical approaches to successful citizens' initiatives using the Provan and Milward (2001) evaluation framework

Provan & Milward (2001)	Community level	Network level	Organisation/participant level
Herranz (2010)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low job placement rates • High perceived service integration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low broad business connections • Moderately strong relationship with business 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low financial resource acquisition • High costs of delivering unit of service
Vickers (1965)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Optimising functional performance (achieving goals) 	-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintaining dynamic balance • Optimising self-maintenance • Maximising flow of resources
Calderwood & Davies (2013)	-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Linking service and community 	-
Tálo et al. (2014); Nowell & Boyd (2014)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sense of community 	-	-
Bock (2016)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fulfilling community demands • Collective action 	-	-
Bosworth et al. (2015)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Addressing local needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key intermediaries negotiating power relations 	-
Bosworth et al. (2016)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Product innovation • Market innovation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Input innovation • Process innovation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organisation innovation
Salemink (2016)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incentive • Familiarisation • Bundling demand • Construction & commissioning • Management & maintenance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inventory of demand • Campaigning • Bundling demand • Tendering & contracting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social capital • Learning experiences • Ownership • Familiarisation • Skills

Service integration can be regarded as an output-based criterion for success that considers how the needs of a community are met. The urgency of an initiative appears to determine its success (Bock 2016). When the need for an alternative service is high, the likelihood of a successful outcome becomes greater. Salemink (2016) built a model for the different development stages of citizens' initiatives that focus on providing broadband internet. Several stages of development in this model refer to the role of communities and how their needs can be met; these stages include incentive, familiarisation, bundling demand, construction and commissioning, and management and maintenance. Addressing a local need has also been found to be an important indicator for success, resulting in innovation of the targeted service and market when local voices are included (Bosworth et al. 2015; Bosworth et al. 2016). Related to the organisational context, Vickers (1965) offered a model containing four dimensions of success and failure in organizations. One of these dimensions of success is optimising functional performance. Seeking to optimise the impact on the chosen field, this dimension is also called 'functional success', which refers to success as the optimal output to be achieved.

In addition to output-based success indicators, sense of community appears to play a role at the community level. While a sense of community does not equal or guarantee the success of initiatives, it appears to be one of several conditions for success. A strong sense of community increases participation levels (Nowell and Boyd 2014; Tal'o et al. 2014). When people feel connected to and responsible for their community, they are more likely to contribute to that community by, for instance, being active in a citizens' initiative.

2.2.2 Network-level effectiveness

Network-level effectiveness is determined by the relationships between citizens' initiatives and other organisations or institutions. Although these relationships appear to be of lesser importance in the work of Herranz (2010), who found a moderate effect of these relationships with business, other studies indicate that the network plays a significant role. The work of Calderwood and Davies (2013) described community retail enterprises and related their success to the network level. These enterprises allow facilities (village shops) to remain available while being run by the community. One element of success that was mentioned was a strong relationship between a shop and the community it serves. This strong link does not specifically entail a relationship with other businesses, but it does entail a relationship with stakeholders in the network.

The importance of relationships with external parties with regard to network-level effectiveness was confirmed in other studies. Bosworth et al. (2015) indicated how the relationship between top-down actors and communities are important for success. Negotiating power relationships was found to be an important role for key intermediaries. Bosworth et al. (2016) furthermore established how good network

relations contribute to input and process innovation. The network also plays a role in inventorying community needs and finding parties to address those needs (Salemink 2016).

2.2.3 Organisation/participant-level effectiveness

Finally, organisation/participant-level effectiveness relates to the different types of resources necessary for successful initiatives. Herranz (2010) proposed two indicators of organisation/participant-level effectiveness: financial resource acquisition and the cost of delivering the unit of service. The three remaining dimensions in the Vickers model (1965) relate to the organisation-level effectiveness proposed by Provan and Milward. The three dimensions – maintaining dynamic balance, optimising self-maintenance, and maximising the flow of resources – refer to financial and other resources and the need to balance them. A drawback to Vickers's work is that it does not clearly indicate to what extent the dimensions must be present for an initiative to be successful.

Looking at organisation/participant-level effectiveness more closely, the role of human resources surfaces: a number of skills and individual achievements are needed for an initiative to become successful. These attributes also benefit initiative participants as they learn new skills and experience personal development. Expanding social capital, expanding knowledge, gaining experience in running an initiative and having a sense of ownership with regards to the initiative are examples of such skills (Bosworth et al. 2015; Salemink 2016).

In summary, the conditions and indicators of success can be framed using the three levels distinguished by Provan and Milward. We conclude that at the community level, citizens' initiatives should produce output that addresses the community's needs. At the network level, relationships with other parties and the community contribute to the success of an initiative. Finding resources and developing skills are effective at the organisation/participant level. So far, little is known about the perspectives of success among different stakeholder groups and the differences and similarities between those perspectives. This research explores the perspective of professionals on successful citizens' initiatives in focus group sessions in depopulating rural areas of the Netherlands.

2.3 Focus group research

To empirically explore conceptualisations of success, we applied focus group research, as this method is suitable for eliciting shared norms and views (Hennink et al. 2011; Kamberelis and Dimitriadis 2014). The focus group discussions provided insight into how professionals working for public and quasi-public institutions collectively construct complex understandings of the success (and

failure) of citizens' initiatives.

2.3.1 Research area and selected sample of focus group participants

A total of three focus group discussions were conducted in the three northern provinces of the Netherlands: Friesland, Groningen and Drenthe. Most rural parts of these provinces are currently experiencing depopulation. Based on a selected sample, potential participants were invited to the focus group discussion.

Participant selection was based on two criteria: they had to be professionally involved in citizens' initiatives, and they had to work in the research area. With the help of informants at local and regional government services from the three northern provinces and other researchers in our research area, we compiled a list of 51 names. We made sure that all the provinces and professions were represented equally when preparing the list.

All people on our list received an invitation to participate in the focus group discussions, and 43 responded. Eight responses were negative because the respondents felt the topic did not relate to their expertise or because they lacked time. We received 35 positive responses.

Based on the respondents' availability and location preference, we chose to run three focus group meetings, one in each of the provinces. The groups were arranged with larger numbers than usual to allow for the possibility of absentees and because of the exploratory character of this research (Hennink et al. 2011). The group size initially ranged from eight to 11 participants, and five to nine were present at the actual focus group discussions. A total of 23 people participated in the focus group discussions (eight men and 15 women). The sessions took 2 hours each, on average. Since participants' backgrounds and the areas where they worked were distributed quite evenly among the groups, we trusted that the groups were representative during the discussions.

All participants were involved with citizens' initiatives that focused on replacing services and facilities and depopulation in their everyday work. However, they had different professional backgrounds; they worked, for example, as government officials from local and regional governments, researchers at local planning offices, regional directors and housing corporation staff. The researchers from the local planning offices played dual roles in their work: They were researching the depopulating areas and also working more directly in guiding and supporting citizens' initiatives (e.g., in assisting with grant applications).

Although the participants were experts in the field, in some cases, they also had other experience in citizens' initiatives. Some participants mentioned that they were personally active in initiatives, and others had witnessed them in the areas where they lived. This duality emerged during the sessions when participants described their personal and non-work-related experiences. During the discussions, the

participants were asked mainly to draw upon their professional perspectives. However, this suggested that there is a thin line between professional and personal perspectives, which is important to consider during the analysis.

2.3.2 Structuring the focus group discussion

During the focus group discussion, the participants described different meanings and aspects of success in citizens' initiatives. The main question the researcher asked was 'What is success and what is failure, as the counterpart to success, in citizens' initiatives?' The participants discussed which aspects they perceived as important for the success and failure of citizens' initiatives. They also discussed whether there was a hierarchy in the importance of the aspects and how the aspects were related.

The discussion within the focus groups was structured into three rounds (see Figure 1). Before starting the three rounds, the researchers presented a definition of citizens' initiatives (Round 0): citizens' initiatives are *'formally or informally organised groups of citizens who are active and contribute to the public domain'*. They also provided a few examples of initiatives to ensure that all professionals were considering the same kind of initiatives, namely, citizens' initiatives that focus on replacing (public) services, taking care of public (green) areas or contributing to liveability in another form.

It was clear that the dominance of the researcher role needed to be mitigated from the very beginning to allow the participants to take the lead in the discussion. A number of participants did not agree with the definition of citizens' initiatives straight off. The meaning and scope of 'public domain' generated a particularly lively debate. Some participants stated that in the rural context of the northern Netherlands, this included not only public services but also privately owned spaces, such as front gardens. The maintenance of these spaces by citizens' initiatives serves not only the property owners but also the community. It also boosts the market value of the homes in a neighbourhood.

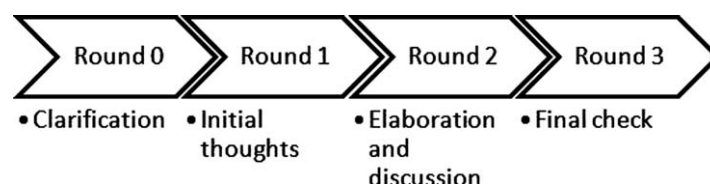


Figure 1: Focus group discussion structure

Once all participants had agreed on the definition of citizens' initiatives, the first round of the discussion started. During the first round, the participants were asked to define initiatives' success and failure in one or two words. They were given a brief period to think before being invited to present their ideas. All aspects they mentioned were written on a whiteboard to further structure the discussion. Some participants said that they had thought of the same things that others had mentioned, thus illustrating the hierarchy of some of the aspects.

In the second round, the participants further explained their conceptualisations of the success and failure of citizens' initiatives. They also discussed the importance of some of the elements that emerged during the first round. The aspects mentioned most often and discussed in the most detail were deemed the aspects most important for success. Most participants agreed on these aspects as determinants for success and failure.

The third and final round allowed the participants the opportunity to assess whether anything had been overlooked, whether their views had changed, or whether new information had been added during the discussion. In general, no new aspects were added in the final round.

During the discussion, the moderator took a passive role, allowing the participants to choose the direction of the discussion. The moderator summarised what had been said and asked for clarifications, if necessary. This approach allowed the participants to 'take over' and provided the researchers with a rich understanding of their views (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis 2014).

2.3.3 Analysis of the focus group discussion

The sessions were videotaped with the participants' permission and then transcribed. Names and other markers of identity were removed from the transcripts to guarantee anonymity. Pseudonyms are used for the participants in the following analysis. The transcripts were analysed using the Atlas.ti qualitative research software package. To guarantee validation, two researchers coded the material independently and compared their findings. In coding the transcripts, they paid attention to what the participants considered successes and failures and how they collectively constructed meanings and norms regarding the citizens' actions and attitudes. The aim of the coding was also to discover aspects of the changing roles of governments and citizens as a result of the Participation Society. Five important aspects emerged as dominant: the importance of the process and the kind of activity, the success of discontinued initiatives, the people who should be in charge, the assessment of failure, and the assessment of financial aspects, initiative size and citizen skills. The following section discusses these themes in greater detail. We will refer to the participants of the focus group discussion as 'our professionals' to prevent confusion with participants of a citizens' initiative and professionals who

were not part of the focus group discussion.

2.4 Results

2.4.1 Process and collective action

According to our professionals, the process of citizens contributing to an initiative is more important than achieving the goals the initiative sets. An initiative is successful when it is active and when there is some form of output. This attitude towards success emerged in all three sessions and was supported by almost all our professionals.

Daniel: 'It is important to create community support, a sense of community [...], that is a big win when it happens. Especially in areas where it is less self-evident, an initiative like that in such neighbourhoods can be of great importance. And perhaps then, I think, the process is of greater importance than the ultimate, the ultimate goal'.

What Daniel, a researcher at a local planning office, says here shows that he considers the process of being involved in an initiative to be more important than the achievement of its original goals. Success lies in the process and the benefits that can result from side effects, such as the sense of community mentioned here. During the discussion, our professionals also mentioned benefits such as organisational skills, professional networks and social capital.

Miranda: 'It is more about the process and about satisfaction with the process, being in motion. You can see that a lot; it is not about the goal of a multifunctional centre or narrowing the road, let's say, whether that is achieved'.

This professional, a housing corporation staff member, stresses the importance of citizens being active within the initiative. Many of our professionals argued that the results are less important than both the process and the collective action of the citizens, as the discussion quoted below illustrates.

Olivia: [Talking about a project that should have become very large] 'Well, now it has been split up into little bits. And it is not the success that it was supposed to be, I think. But the little parts and the process were very successful indeed. And then, the question remains, is that a problem?'

Emily: 'The free-styling, I think that it is also very important. That you can switch between different things [.. .]'

Isabelle: 'But then you should say, it is not the issue whether your original goal has been met but whether there is a result. And that can be in little parts, too. I think getting results might be very important'

This fragment of the discussion shows that these professionals, a government official and two societal organization advisors, were less concerned about the goals the initiative had initially planned to accomplish. The goals and outcomes may be adjusted during the process. To them, it was more important for the initiative to produce some type of result or outcome, resulting from collective action, than to achieve the original goals. This relates to the earlier comments about the importance of being in motion. When discussing citizens' initiatives that focus on the public domain and the replacement of a service or facility, our professionals viewed goal achievement as subordinate as long as the initiative produces some kind of output.

2.4.2 The role of social learning

In all three sessions, our professionals made striking comments about the relationship between actions and success. Our professionals always viewed bottom-up progress in a community as a good thing. Even when an initiative stopped or failed for whatever reason, it was still considered successful because of the social learning experiences. The following quotes elaborate on this view.

Ethan: '[.. .] If you decide not to continue, this might nevertheless be a success because you sorted things out, and you went on an adventure. But you can arrive at the conclusion that it is not possible, or it is too risky, or we haven't got the money, or whatever [to continue]. And then you say, based on arguments: we have to quit now. And that is not failure but making a sensible decision. I think'

Ethan, a researcher at a local planning office, illustrates that even when an initiative is stopped and activity ceases, it does not automatically mean that the initiative has failed. There may be good reasons for discontinuing an initiative. If stopping the initiative is properly thought through, it can still be considered successful because collective action is also an informal learning process that creates a sense of community, as the following statement illustrates:

Olivia: '[. .] well, when is it not a success? We often see things that did not work out, or were stopped, or went bankrupt [. .] But those people have learned so much. So the process in itself has been a success if you consider the timespan we expect from governments and citizens. Compared to that, what we are doing is not at all bad. The pioneering in itself is already a great success'.

Olivia again stresses the importance of the process. Participants in an initiative can learn much from their participation and as a result improve their skills, such as organising activities, communicating with different kinds of people, or interacting with the government. These social learning processes were highly valued by the interviewed government officials and professionals. Therefore, they collectively constructed success by referring to initiatives being a success in general because the 'side effects' always result in benefits for the participants in an initiative or for the community they live in. In one of the sessions, Brian illustrated this by explaining that the participants in an initiative *'[. .] got to know each other; they formed a group and became active together. Thus, a kind of togetherness was created through which people sought to deal with the future'*.

This meaning can be related to the aspects of success our professionals previously mentioned: process and collective action. Citizens and communities benefit by contributing to the process of an initiative and the realisation of collective action.

2.4.3 Empowerment

In addition to this meaning, our professionals agreed on another aspect of success: empowerment. Citizens themselves – not a local government or another institution – need to be in charge of an initiative.

Oscar: 'What I am trying to say is that granting authority, enabling the people themselves to be in charge will not automatically make a citizens' initiative good. But a good citizens' initiative, I think will get stuck if the citizens are not in charge'.

Like Oscar, a consultant on demographic change, many of our professionals argued that government support through funding or expertise is fine, but the decision-making and leadership should be in the hands of citizens. However, this is complicated for local government officials. On the one hand, they want to transfer responsibilities to citizens, and they appreciate it when citizens take over former public tasks. On the other hand, government officials are often too eager to 'help' citizens as much as they can. A side effect of their eagerness is that they end up taking over the initiative. Hannah, a researcher at a local planning office,

illustrates this attitude:

Hannah: ‘Another thing which is important to me, something I notice local government officials tend to do with good intentions, is helping, generally speaking. They see an initiative and think, well, we are going to facilitate this a lot. And then they facilitate in such a way that they take over the initiative. They have the positive intention of “We are going to help you” rather than “You cannot do it”, but in the end, they start doing so much that the inhabitants think, “Well, who’s doing this exactly?”’

This quotation demonstrates that local and regional governments still play an important role in citizens’ initiatives, which results in the risk of local and regional governments taking over the leadership of an initiative. Our professionals argued that governments should support initiatives without taking the lead away from the initiators.

2.4.4 Assessment of failure

The discussion in all three focus group sessions focused more on the aspects of success than on the aspects of failure. However, three aspects of failure did emerge, some explicitly and others related to the aspects of success mentioned here.

First, the counterparts of the first three aspects of success define failure, meaning citizens not partaking in the collective action and process and not being in charge of the initiative. Our professionals viewed an initiative as a failure if there is no activity, nothing happens and no one contributes. Oscar referred to this state as the initiative being ‘without consequence’. An initiative taken over by local government, third-sector or other organisation was qualified as a failure because it then ceased to be of and by the citizens. However, support and guidance from other organisations or government was not considered a failure as long as the decision-making and execution remained in the hands of the citizens.

A second aspect of failure that emerged concerns the safety of communities. Our professionals stressed that an important condition for failure is some sort of damage to others or the living environment. Safety should be guaranteed at all times. This entails physical safety, such as protection from violence or damage, but also psychosocial safety, or the inclusion of all groups. Local and other levels of government play a role in monitoring and guaranteeing this safety.

Finally, community support played a role in the success-failure discussion. If a large number of community members do not support an initiative, it was also perceived as unsuccessful. Not all community members need to be happy with the

initiative, but most of our professionals did think that the initiative should serve a purpose and that it should have broader support than its initiators; otherwise, there is no point in starting it and carrying it out. An initiative should therefore be relevant and be supported locally. In talking about success, the role of relevance and support was mentioned but did not stand out much; therefore, it appears that an absence of relevance and support is of greater importance than the amount of support in general.

2.4.5 Assessment of finances, initiative size and skills

Although most citizens' initiatives are at least partly funded by local government, charities or investors, our professionals left financial issues almost unmentioned. The only times finances became a topic of discussion was when one of our professionals commented on how striking it was that, so far, nobody had brought up financing. This occurred in two of the three focus group sessions. After these comments, the discussion quickly returned to another topic. Apparently, the costs of an initiative, the financial resources needed for activities, or whether the initiative is government supported or not, do not matter in determining whether an initiative is a success or a failure. Efficiency and effectiveness in spending financial resources were not brought up or discussed. Our professionals evidently felt that it was acceptable for initiatives to have financial costs that they cannot always cover themselves and thus need funding.

Another aspect that emerged during the discussion was the size of an initiative. Initiatives take many forms and sizes, and this is important when considering their success.

Hannah: 'But this is a very large initiative apparently, though it's only sweeping the streets in groups [...]. That is also something I have trouble coming to terms with: people are eager to turn everything into something very big. And I feel like, let the flowers bloom, all the little bits can grow into something bigger or the little bits are fine too'.

Our professionals also mentioned various other examples of large and small initiatives. They were aware that the bigger the initiative, the more skills are required both from them and from citizens. A larger size is related to a greater risk of failure and a greater need for more investments at the start of an initiative. This means that size is an important factor when considering success and failure.

Related to the size of an initiative, our professionals also considered the amount of time and skills required for the initiative to be a success.

Claire: 'That reminds me, I am involved with volunteers setting up a cooperative. And that requires quite a lot – think of time, knowledge and skills. [...] And knowledge does not always mean college knowledge but that you know where to go to get things done. That you are not afraid to sit at a table with a housing corporation manager and [...] Well, I think that is quite something [...] And it will be different when it is about taking over the maintenance of green spaces, so it will not be the case for all initiatives. But those processes can be a lot slower than initially thought. And when I see the amount of time people put into it, as volunteers, well, I really admire that'.

This quotation, from a consultant at a societal organisation, illustrates that it is unlikely that an initiative will succeed without these skills, which are an absolute condition for the success of an initiative and relate to the perception of success. Our professionals acknowledged that the demands on citizens correspond to the size of the initiative.

2.5 Conclusion

The aim of this article was to work towards a conceptualisation of success regarding citizens' initiatives from a professional perspective. Comparing our findings to the theoretical three-level framework for success, some similarities and differences were found. We will discuss our findings per level below.

Success at the community level referred to producing outputs that address community needs. Given that initiatives are expected to replace former public services, a focus on achieving goals was anticipated. However, it appears that our professionals judged the process and the positive side effects of it as more important than achieving the goals themselves. These Dutch professionals perceived citizens' initiatives in rural areas as successful simply based on the extent to which citizens were continuously active and in charge, without referring to the output. Addressing community needs, the other element at the community level did receive support in these findings. The community being in charge, and in this sense addressing its own needs, was found to be an aspect of success. Establishing a sense of community was deemed by our professionals to be an important effect of citizens' initiatives, resulting from the process of citizens collaborating; therefore, it was found to play a role in the conceptualisation of success.

Determining success at the network level did not receive much support from our professionals. Network-level effectiveness refers to relationships with other parties outside the initiative. Networking activities received little attention during the discussion. The only reference made to these network relationships occurred while discussing the side effects of citizens' initiatives. Expanding personal networks and building relationships with other parties were viewed as positive

side effects and hence as part of the success of citizens' initiatives.

The discussion of the 'side effects' of citizens' initiatives also concerned the organisation/participant level, and in this context, the side effects were strongly supported by our findings. Social learning experiences and developing skills were regarded by our professionals as important effects. Our professionals perceived the value of these skills and learning experiences to be so high that even if an initiative's goals were not achieved, the initiative was successful if the initiators learned from the process.

Another element at the organisation/participant level was financial resources. However, the role of financial resources received little attention during the discussion, illustrating that this element was perceived as unimportant in conceptualising success.

The understanding of failure was noteworthy. The scant attention paid to failure in the literature based on our literature review is consistent with the view of a large proportion of our professionals. They paid little attention to conceptualising failure, and the overall shared view among our professionals was that an initiative is always successful because of the learning experiences, community building and empowerment it affords.

Overall, we can conclude that professionals who work in Dutch depopulating rural areas generally conceptualise the success of citizens' initiatives based on the organisation/participant level, where learning experiences and developing skills are important. It is remarkable that our participants conceptualised success in a rather soft way, neglecting the importance of goal achievement at the community level. This could be because the relationship between achieving goals and success is complicated. Achieving goals appears to be more implicitly important. Instead of achieving the more practical goals set, our professionals appeared to distinguish the side effects and value them more highly; these effects concern constructing a sense of community and social learning. Both of these underlying goals were considered a result of the process and contributed to explaining why initiatives were regarded as 'always successful'. From a professional perspective, the goals of an initiative therefore appear to be not those set by the initiative itself but those regarding the creation of a sense of community and liveability. On the one hand, this perception of success is related to a romantic view of citizenship, where a sense of community is the ultimate goal. This view is likely to be considered naive and perhaps even paternalistic when the views of other stakeholders are taken into account. On the other hand, our professionals believed that to stimulate more citizens' initiatives in the Participation Society, learning skills and building community are essential for initiatives to succeed. In addition to their material output, initiatives can succeed through their immaterial output and contribute to and help build the Participation Society.

2.6 Discussion

Our professionals' conceptualisation of success here can be qualified as 'soft'. Compared to definitions of initiatives' success in the literature, our professionals expected relatively little from citizens' initiatives in terms of goal achievement in order to label them as successful. One explanation for this 'softer' evaluation of success is that the shift to the Participation Society has also brought about some humility among professionals, who do not want to judge the citizens' efforts too harshly or ask too much of them. Heaping greater responsibilities on citizens and expecting more from them has potentially made professionals more hesitant to judge; they may want to avoid putting excessive pressure on citizens' initiatives and want to appreciate their efforts. It is also in their interest to encourage resilient behaviour among citizens, given the changing environment in rural areas. Their modest expectations might change over time, if both professionals and citizens become better adjusted to these new roles. It will be interesting to see how professionals regard success or failure of citizens' initiatives in ten years, when the Participation Society has developed further.

Another explanation is accountability. The discrepancy between governments having to let go and still remaining accountable illustrates that the current government system is not well prepared for the shift towards the Participation Society (Flinders and Moon 2011; Scientific Council for Government Policy 2013). Issues regarding accountability are also still widely discussed in the literature related to the Participation Society (e.g., Jones and Little 2000; Wiseman 2006; Uitermark 2015). Local governments might still have to conform to national and other legislation; this makes it impossible to transfer responsibilities and therefore conditions citizens' initiatives, at least for now, to be more supplementary to existing policies rather than to stand alone. This complementary outlook on citizens' initiatives may explain why their output in terms of achieving goals was found not by our professionals to be of great importance.

The shift towards the Participation Society has not fully taken place, as illustrated by some of the traditional roles that are still present. Governments have a say in which initiatives are subsidised and which are not and therefore decide which initiatives are more likely to succeed. Financial resources are usually needed for an initiative to roll out its activities. However, during the discussions, our professionals stressed many times that citizens and not (local) governments should be in charge of initiatives. By deciding on the allocation of these resources to particular initiatives, governments thus retain a selection tool, and with this power to select, they can still exercise a more paternalistic role.

In light of the changing roles related to the shift towards the Participation Society, our professionals did not seem to be fully able to foresee the efforts and risk-taking that are required from citizens. Our professionals referred to different scales of initiatives that require higher or lower skills levels. More complicated

initiatives carry with them more risks for the people involved in terms of liability and the time and effort needed. Our professionals appeared to perceive the involvement of citizens as self-evident. However, the soft evaluation of success and the relegation of goal achievement to the background seem disproportionate to the efforts and risk-taking of citizens. There are financial and other risks involved in initiatives, especially in larger-scale initiatives. From this perspective, focusing only on people's level of activity and not the results they achieve is a limited way of approaching success.

This study focused on the perspectives of professionals operating in Dutch rural areas, which raises the question of how well these findings represent citizens' initiatives in other contexts. Governance structures, geographical contexts, cultural aspects and rural structures differ in other places and may influence the perception of success among various stakeholder groups. However, ultimately, the question remains: Who decides what success is, and who owns success in the Participation Society? The meaning ascribed to success and failure by active citizens may differ from the perspective of the respondents in this study since they want to achieve the goals they initially set out to achieve. The perception of success of both active and non-active citizens will be the subject of further research on citizens' initiatives.

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*Understanding the success of rural citizens’
initiatives: Perspectives of founders*

3

Abstract

Against the backdrop of depopulation and the Big Society, citizens' initiatives in rural areas are believed to be able to mitigate decreases in service provision in these regions. However, the factors influencing the success and failure of such citizens' initiatives have thus far hardly been explored. First, this paper conceptualizes the definitions of successful citizens' initiatives from the perspective of the initiators. Second, it explores the factors influencing the self-evaluated success level of the initiators' own initiatives. Questionnaires focused on how initiators consider the success of an initiative in general and on which factors influenced the success or failure of their own initiative were completed by 157 initiators (response rate 26.8%). The results reveal three perspectives on how successful initiatives are conceptualized: success on the network, organizational and participant levels. Furthermore, the self-evaluated success level of the citizens' own initiatives is most strongly influenced by the extent to which the goals are achieved. In concluding, we discuss how initiators and professionals adopt different perspectives on the success of citizens' initiatives. Aligning expectations and implementing the necessary role changes can facilitate citizens' initiatives.

3.1 Introduction

Demographic transformations, austerity measures and changing relations between government and citizens as a result of neo-liberal policies have given rise to community-led developments in rural areas (Herbert-Cheshire and Higgins, 2004) and fuelled interest in citizens' initiatives in general (Bailey and Pill, 2015; Bock, 2016; Dekker & van den Broek, 1998; Flinders and Moon, 2011; Fyfe and Milligan, 2003; Healey, 2015; Lambrou and Petrescu, 2016; Steiner and Atterton, 2014). This interest has grown in particular because public services are under pressure and civil society actors increasingly contribute to these services, for example, by starting social enterprises (Healey, 2015; Munoz et al., 2015; Teasdale, 2012). In rural areas, the need for citizens who contribute to service delivery is more urgent than in metropolitan areas because of changes such as (expected) depopulation, ageing, digital exclusion, school closures, unemployment, under-employment, high mobility costs and changing consumption demands (Copus et al., 2011; Saleminck, 2016; Skerratt, 2010; Steiner and Atterton, 2014; Woods, 2006). Therefore, knowledge of the contributions of community-led development, social entrepreneurship and citizens' initiatives to service delivery is important.

Teasdale (2012) conceptualizes social enterprises as organizations that use trade to produce societal benefits. In this vein, citizens' initiatives can be considered a special form of social entrepreneurship with a focus on the public domain. Citizens' initiatives may be viewed as *a group of people contributing to the public domain on a voluntary basis and without financial compensation* (De Haan et al., 2017). Regarding the aspect of societal benefit, it is logical that citizens' initiatives and social enterprises are closely related to each other. These concepts are furthermore related because both include the notion of active citizens and the delivery of public services when the state or market fails (Cheshire and Woods, 2009; Healey, 2015; Jones and Little, 2000; Shucksmith et al., 2006; Teasdale, 2012). However, Montgomery et al. (2012) also emphasize the differences between social entrepreneurship and citizens' initiatives. They define collective social entrepreneurship as *'collaboration amongst similar as well as diverse actors for the purpose of applying business principles to solving social problems'*. While collective social enterprises and citizens' initiatives require collective action in order to reach their goals, citizens' initiatives are always composed of citizens and show less diversity in actors than collective social enterprises do. Other actors or stakeholders can be involved with a citizens' initiative but operate from outside the initiative. Lastly, we prefer to use the concept of 'citizens' initiatives' as a form of social enterprise because it is close to the situation and concept used in the Dutch context (*'burgerinitiatieven'*).

Some studies have shown that in rural areas in particular, citizens' initiatives have the potential to replace pressurized services and foster the resilience and empowerment of these rural communities (see, for example, Bock, 2016; Calderwood and Davies, 2013; Herbert-Cheshire and Higgins, 2004; Munoz et al., 2015; Saleminck and Strijker, 2016). At the same time, criticism has arisen based on

the question of whether citizens' initiatives can carry the responsibility of replacing pressurized (former public) services and whether it should be expected of them (Sud et al., 2009). However, relatively little is known about when a citizens' initiative is perceived as successful by various stakeholders and how successful operations and actions of these initiatives can be enabled. Our previous research on defining the success of citizens' initiatives from the perspective of professionals showed that professionals, including government officials, consider initiatives successful first and foremost when the citizens contribute to collective action and when they are in charge of the initiative (De Haan et al., 2017). However, the question remains whether the actors who are in charge share this perception of success. Therefore, this paper addresses the perspective of the citizens who have started citizens' initiatives. Based on survey data gathered in rural areas of the northern Netherlands from 585 citizens' initiatives, this study investigated which factors are important for successful citizens' initiatives in order to answer the following main research questions: *How do founders of citizens' initiatives define the success of initiatives in general, and which factors are perceived as contributing to the success of their own initiative?* 'Defining success' refers to the idea that the perception of success depends on subjective and collective experiences that are, first, related to a number of factors concerning the community-led development and second, related to the context in which the initiative is embedded (such as rural areas). Moreover, the perception of success consists of descriptions of actions and judgements in particular. Therefore, success was explored by introducing a number of factors and a scale describing their importance (from 'very unimportant for success' to 'very important for success').

3.2 Theoretical background

3.2.1 Conceptualizing successful citizens' initiatives

In rural areas, a great variety of services are organized and maintained by citizens. This study addresses citizens' initiatives that aim to improve liveability by the maintenance of former public services, for example, initiatives that take care of a public green area (shaping places) or manage local swimming pools (health) or public meeting places (social well-being). The goals of these initiatives are to solve or relieve the issues that rural areas currently face, such as building vacancies, impoverishment, the decline of primary services and the secondary function of services, i.e., meeting places (Herbert-Cheshire and Higgins, 2004; Steiner and Atterton, 2014). Although citizens' initiatives are a form of social enterprise, their focus is less on business principles.

Thus far, there is little literature on the conceptualization of the success of citizens' initiatives from the perspective of the founders themselves (De Haan et al., 2017). Most studies on social enterprise and citizens' initiatives have explored the range of factors that influence success from an 'outside' view (Jones and Little, 2000;

Lambru and Petrescu, 2016; Munoz et al., 2015; Salemink and Strijker, 2016; Taló et al., 2014; Wiseman, 2006)). De Haan et al. (2017) developed a theoretical understanding of success based on previous research. They distinguish three different levels of success: success at the community level (addressing the needs of the community), success at the network level (network relations contributing to success), and success at the organizational or participant level (finding resources and developing skills). This approach towards success implies that the concept is related to several aspects and that multiple perspectives on success can be distinguished, making it relevant to investigate the perspectives of different stakeholders.

De Haan et al. (2017) furthermore focused on the perception of success from the perspective of professionals. Based on focus-group discussions with both policy professionals and what Weatherley and Lipsky (1977) would refer to as 'street-level bureaucrats' - government officials interacting directly with citizens - it appears that the success of an initiative is not necessarily related to achieving set goals; rather, the process was said to be of greater importance. The professionals perceived initiatives as successful if the initiative participants contribute to collective action and are in charge of the initiative. They stressed that many skills and much knowledge can be obtained through the social learning experiences involved in taking part in the process of an initiative, and these were seen as important aspects of success, even when the goals were not (or not yet) achieved.

The sparse literature on understanding the success of citizens' initiatives as a contextual concept neglects the different perceptions of failure as well. This situation may imply that success and failure are on a continuum, where not being successful can be understood as failure and the further an initiative moves away from being successful, the closer it moves towards failure.

Given the issues that rural areas face and the pressure that is placed on services and liveability as a result, it seems that more is at stake when citizens' initiatives fail. Successful citizens' initiatives in rural areas can result in more than merely service provision. Several side-effects benefit rural communities as a whole, such as personal development and social learning (Bosworth et al., 2015; Salemink, 2016), empowerment (De Haan et al., 2017; Steiner and Farmer, 2017), resilience (Steiner and Atterton, 2014) and development of a sense of community (Nowell and Boyd, 2014; Taló et al., 2014).

3.2.2 Citizens' initiatives and factors influencing their success

To understand the relativity of success, which is at any time related to the geographical context and the type and capabilities of stake-holders, this paper explores which factors are defined as crucial by the founders of citizens' initiatives in the northern rural Dutch areas. After reviewing literature on the factors

influencing the success of community-led local initiatives, we observe four overarching themes: the initiative's characteristics, functional success, social relations and input. The first theme is the characteristics of the initiatives and the role these characteristics play in their success and failure. One aspect of this theme is the development phase of a given initiative. An initiative progresses through various phases over the course of its development (Munoz et al., 2015; Salemink, 2016). Initiatives start with a sense of urgency, in some cases as a result of government withdrawal or market failure (Salemink and Strijker, 2016). A group of people comes together, and an organizational structure is developed in several phases. In the final phase, the initiative becomes operational. According to these authors, passing through these phases ultimately leads to the establishment of a successful initiative, although these studies neglect a formal definition of the concept of success.

Other characteristics of an initiative follow from a specific consideration of the Dutch context. Verhoeven and Tonkens (2011) show that certain characteristics make some initiatives more successful than others. Examples of such characteristics are the duration of the participants' residence in the neighbourhood, the participants' connectedness with the neighbourhood and the type of goals an initiative has. Hurenkamp (2009) describes four different kinds of initiatives based on their internal and external communication levels: feather-light, networked, cooperative and nested. These four types are assumed to produce various forms of social cohesion within the community. However, Hurenkamp does not explore the relationship between these types of initiatives and the level of success in detail, although communication level may be a characteristic that contributes to an initiative's success. The second theme relates to the concept of functional success. The functional success of an initiative refers to its output and performance, including the aspect of 'goal achievement'. Several authors implicitly refer to output as addressing unmet needs (Bock, 2016), transforming living conditions (Sotkasiira et al., 2010) and impacting the chosen field (Vickers, 1965). In defining the success of citizens' initiatives, achieving goals can be considered as an element of the *definition of success*. At the same time, there can be a *positive influence* of achieving goals on the perceived level of success.

The third theme considers the social relationships present within initiatives. Lambru and Petrescu (2016) argue that a good relationship amongst the founders adds to the likelihood of the initiative's success. In addition, the longer the members of a community group have been familiar with each other, the greater the number of initiatives started and the greater the success rates of these initiatives will be (Haggett and Aitken, 2015). Efflux is linked to these social relationships because it negatively influences trust and the relationships amongst founders. Negative experiences can cause founders to want to stop their activities (exit strategy) as opposed to giving voice to their concerns and staying involved (Hirschman, 1970). Another potential cause of efflux is volunteer burnout, which precedes an

individual's intention to quit and therefore to stop his or her activities with the initiative (Allen and Mueller, 2013; Salemink, 2016).

In addition to social relationships within the initiatives, external social relationships can also play a role in the success of initiatives. This role becomes clear in examining social capital, a person's individual skills and connection to a wider network (Tregear and Cooper, 2016). Initiatives become more successful when their participants have strong social capital (Haggett and Aitken, 2015; Neumeier, 2012; Salemink and Strijker, 2016), which is necessary for building trust, building networks and getting initiatives started. Rural areas display stronger social networks than other areas (Steiner and Atterton, 2014), making the rural setting a viable starting point for citizens' initiatives.

The fourth theme, input, considers many aspects related to the effort put into the initiative. The first aspect under this theme is the role of skills, which appears in several studies (Lambru and Petrescu, 2016; Munoz et al., 2015; O'Shaughnessy & O'Hara, 2016; Salemink, 2016; Wiseman, 2006). The presence and use of skills is considered to lead to a positive effect on the likelihood of success. However, various types of skills are needed during different development phases. First, leadership skills are believed to be necessary for successful initiatives (Lambru and Petrescu, 2016; O'Shaughnessy & O'Hara, 2016; Wiseman, 2006), as is strategic or entrepreneurial thinking (O'Shaughnessy & O'Hara, 2016). This way of thinking contributes to the mobilization of resources that can benefit the outcomes of the initiative. Leadership at the local and regional levels can be more challenging than central leadership, making the role of local leaders in the rural context even more important (Beer, 2014). In addition to leadership, communication skills are considered a success factor because they optimize internal as well as external cooperation (Lambru and Petrescu, 2016).

The second aspect of the input theme is a sense of ownership, which is identified by several studies as an important positive influence on success (Lambru and Petrescu, 2016; Munoz et al., 2015; Salemink and Strijker, 2016; Wiseman, 2006). Multiple factors, such as setting an agenda that is based on the urgency of an initiative, can play a role in achieving a sense of ownership (Munoz et al., 2015; Wiseman, 2006). When a community decides on the priorities of an initiative, the community develops a sense of ownership as a result. Decision-making capacity also contributes to the sense of ownership (Lambru and Petrescu, 2016).

The third aspect related to input is the role of local governments in the success of initiatives (Hurenkamp et al., 2006; Verhoeven and Tonkens, 2011; Wiseman, 2006). When the relationship between an initiative and local government functions well, success will be positively influenced (Verhoeven and Tonkens, 2011). The role of the government in such well-functioning relationships is twofold: governments are expected to provide opportunities for deploying initiatives and they are supposed to give up responsibilities in order to allow initiatives a chance of

becoming successful (Hurenkamp et al., 2006). It must be noted that not all communities are capable of shouldering these new responsibilities (Steiner and Farmer, 2017). Additionally, financial and organizational support of local governments also influences the success of initiatives in a positive manner (Wiseman, 2006). These differing findings indicate how complicated it can be for local governments to positively support citizens' initiatives without creating obstacles to success.

The last input aspect, community support, refers to input from outside the initiative. Support from the community, i.e., more people standing behind an initiative, is believed to positively influence success (Munoz et al., 2015; Neumeier, 2012); contribute to initiatives coming into existence and establish their legitimacy. Similar to citizens' initiatives, community embeddedness is also important in shaping and continuing entrepreneurship (Jack and Anderson, 2002). Based on this literature study the following conceptual framework is developed (see Fig. 1).

While discussing the literature on factors influencing the success of citizens' initiatives, we noted three things. First, most previous studies use qualitative data and take the perspective of stakeholders other than the founders of the citizens' initiative themselves. In this paper, we specifically address the perspective of founders.

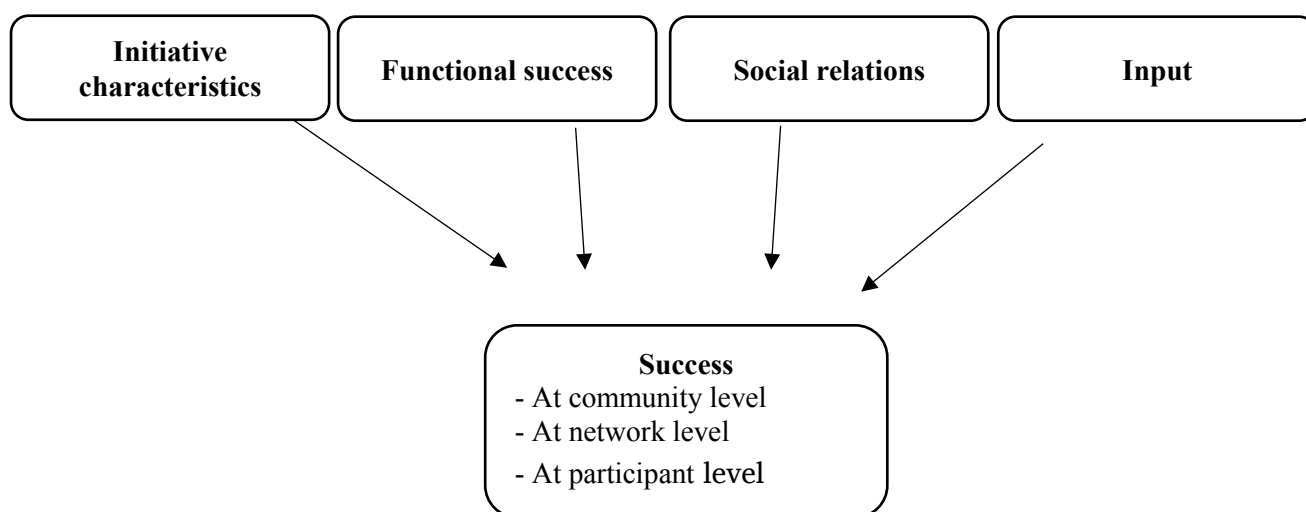


Figure 1: Conceptual framework of themes influencing three levels of success

Second, the literature does not necessarily focus on citizens' initiatives in a rural setting. Given the previously discussed need to resolve issues faced by rural areas and, consequently, the expectations regarding rural citizens' initiatives, the rural setting deserves specific attention. Furthermore, Jones and Little (2000) illustrate that good practices of transferring responsibilities in an urban setting do not

necessarily have the same effect in rural areas. Therefore, we focus specifically on the functioning of citizens' initiatives in rural areas.

Third, the main focus of previous studies is nearly always on the positive effects on success, neglecting the negative effects. As it is important to focus not only on success stories (Uitermark, 2015), we include negative effects and unsuccessful initiatives in this study. In addition, the positive aspects of the role of citizens' initiatives in service provision are not undisputed. On the one hand, some authors warn of several downsides of service provision by citizens' initiatives (Jones and Little, 2000; Wiseman, 2006; Uitermark, 2015). Examples of these downsides are an increase in the unequal distribution of social and economic capital, power concentration, bureaucracy and the inability to adapt to socio-economic differences (Salemink and Strijker, 2016). It is argued that to prevent these effects, service provision should be mainly a state task. On the other hand, some authors stress the potential of citizens' initiatives to deliver services (Bock, 2016; Boonstra and Boelens, 2011; Healey, 2015). Citizens' initiatives can prevent rural marginalization and can provide higher-quality services because they have access to local knowledge that attunes the services to local needs. With this study, we aim to add to the theoretical debate on citizens' initiatives in the rural context by including the perspective of the founders regarding both the conceptualization of successful initiatives in general and the self-evaluated success of their own initiative without neglecting the negative effects on success. In the following quantitative analysis, we used the above-described theory to cluster our variables into themes in order to construct a model for predicting the self-evaluated success.

3.3 Researching citizens' initiatives in the northern Netherlands

3.3.1 Research area and sample

The data presented in this paper were collected in the rural areas of the three northern provinces of the Netherlands, some of which are experiencing or expect to experience depopulation in the near future. In these areas, relatively more citizens' initiatives occur because of the depopulation and the pressure on services and facilities (Houwelingen et al., 2014). First, we created an inventory of initiatives that are or were active in the rural areas of the northern Netherlands. Information for this inventory was provided by local and regional governments, planning bureaus and an internet search conducted by the researchers. In addition, snowballing was used, in which the respondents who filled out the questionnaire were asked whether they knew of other initiatives in the area.

To reach a large sample in an efficient manner and to make responding convenient for the respondents, a digital questionnaire was distributed via e-mail (Dillman et al., 2014; Sue and Ritter, 2007). However, for some initiatives, no e-mail addresses were available. These initiatives received an invitation by traditional mail with a link

to the digital questionnaire. We preferred to direct these respondents to the digital questionnaire rather than to a hard-copy version because of the additional costs and the extra effort required for respondents to return printed questionnaires. The link to the questionnaire was also posted on two websites that we expected the potential respondents to visit.

The invitation for the questionnaire stated the purpose of the research and guaranteed the anonymity of the participants. To increase the response rate, three randomly selected participants were rewarded with a €20 voucher. A reminder was sent to those initiatives that had not yet responded two weeks after they had received the first e-mail invitation. The initiatives that were approached by traditional mail did not receive a reminder for technical reasons. However, because they only formed a small part of the inventory, we believe the lack of a reminder did not significantly influence the sample.

The questionnaire was aimed at the person who was currently the leader of the initiative based on the assumption that he or she would be able to provide information about the entire initiative and would have the best overview of its activities. The disadvantage of asking this person to answer the questions is that events may occur outside the purview of the group's leader, making him or her unaware of certain aspects of the initiative. Additionally, the person in the lead may have different perspectives and opinions from other participants. These aspects should be considered when interpreting the results, as the leader may have more insights and greater access to information. The invitation stated a preference for the person leading the initiative to answer the questions. All initiatives within the inventory received only one invitation and were asked once to fill out the questionnaire. Since the questionnaire included the name of the initiative, it was possible to check whether multiple questionnaires per initiative were returned, and we found that such duplication did not occur.

A limitation of the inventory surfaced when we considered the visibility of citizens' initiatives. For the inventory, we relied on informants from local and regional governments and planning bureaus. Those informants provided most of the input for the inventory (see Table 1). The informants noted that there are also – in many cases smaller-scale – citizens' initiatives that operate without governmental or other forms of support, such as funding or professional help. These initiatives in general remained unknown to our informants and were therefore not part of the inventory. The invisibility of this type of initiatives has also been noted by Green and Goetting (2010). By adopting the snowball method, we tried to minimize this bias. However, we are aware that our sample may not represent an exhaustive list of citizens' initiatives in the research area. Given the wide variety of initiatives and the large number in the sample, we believe that our findings are representative despite this limitation.

Table 1: Number of suggestions by origin of source

Source	No. of suggestions concerning an initiative
Local and regional governments	578
Planning bureaus	30
Respondents	15

In total, 623 initiatives were included in the inventory, of which 491 received an invitation to complete the questionnaire by e-mail and 95 by traditional mail. Thirty-seven e-mail addresses and one postal address no longer existed, and no other contact details were found, resulting in a total of 585 invited initiatives. Of these, 157 respondents completed the survey, resulting in a response rate of 26.8%. Although both active and inactive citizens' initiatives were included in the inventory, the questionnaire was predominantly completed by founders of active initiatives (86%).

The questionnaire consisted of four parts regarding success and failure. First, it inquired about the *general characteristics* of the initiative, such as size, life span, people involved and whether it was currently active. Second, following the general questions, the respondents were asked to *evaluate the performance of their initiative*. The third part consisted of questions regarding what *factors they thought had influenced the success or failure* of their initiative. Fourth, the respondents were asked to *evaluate the success and failure of initiatives in general*, regardless of their own initiative. The following section describes the operationalizations used to transform the three levels of success and the four themes of conditions for success within the literature into variables for our analysis.

3.3.2 Operationalizations and analysis

The respondents were asked to evaluate the performance of their initiative. '*Self-evaluated success*' was operationalized by asking the respondents, on a scale from 1 to 10, to what extent they considered their own initiative a success. On average, the respondents rated their own initiative at 7.89 ($n = 157$; $s.d. = 1.82$).

Contrasting the *self-evaluated success* of their own initiative, the respondents were asked how they perceived the success of citizens' initiatives in general. To construct a *conceptualization of success*, the respondents were presented with 16 statements in the fourth part of the questionnaire that could relate to successful or failed initiatives. The respondents were asked to indicate to what extent each statement was important to them in describing successful initiatives, regardless of their evaluation of their own initiative. The statements consisted of the aspects related to functional success and input described in the theory section, such as the role of achieving goals, representativeness of the community, the role of skills and other characteristics of initiatives, to enable a comparison of the perspectives of

professionals and founders. The respondents indicated on a scale from 1 to 5 ('1 – very unimportant for success' to '5 – very important for success') to what extent, in their opinion, each aspect contributed to defining success. The conceptualizations of success were constructed using principal component analysis (PCA). Using the Varimax rotation method, the 16 variables were added to the analysis. Variables scoring higher than 0.40 in the component analysis were added to the scale, each representing one conceptualization of success. Three perspectives of success conceptualization were constructed. Six variables did not score high enough to improve the scales and were omitted.

Table 2: Themes and variables for regression analysis (dependent variable is 'self-evaluated success')

Theme	Question/Variable	Variable characteristics
Initiative characteristics	No. of years of existence	Numeric
	Development phase	5 answer options
	No. of people involved	Numeric
	No. of contact moments	Numeric
	Time investment of initiative leader	Numeric (hours per week)
	Type of goals	Open – 13 dummy categories
	Levels of communication	4 answer options
	Type of financing	4 answer options
Functional success	Currently active	Yes/No
	Goal achievement	Scale 1-5
	Embeddedness within community	4 answer options
	When satisfied with initiative	4 answer options
	Reputation	Scale 1-5
	Continuation by others in case of stopping	Yes/No
Social relationships	Who started initially	8 answer options
	Familiar with each other before starting	4 answer options
	Stopped members	Yes/No
	Intentions to quit	4 answer options
	Social capital	Scale 1-5
Input	No. of professionals	Numeric
	Involvement of government/organizations	8 answer options
	Community support	Yes/No
	Who has say over the initiative	7 answer options
	Feeling responsible for goal achievement	Scale 1-5
	Knowledge and skills	Scale 1-5
	Leadership	Yes/No
Respondents' suggestions	Success factors present in initiative	Open – 11 dummy categories
	Failure factors present in initiative	Open – 10 dummy categories

Using regression analysis, we constructed a model for predicting success. Based on the aspects discussed in the literature review, 27 variables regarding success and failure factors were clustered into five themes (see Table 2) and where necessary recoded into dummies (Field, 2005). The first four themes are based on the four themes of factors influencing success: initiative characteristics, functional success, social relationships and input. A fifth theme was added based on the success and failure factors the respondents suggested. In answering an open question, the respondents could indicate what factors influenced the success or failure of their own initiative. Control variables were added to the analysis in an additional theme. The variables controlled the analysis for the influence of gender, age, the presence of newcomers vs. locals and education levels.

All the control variables were measured at the level of the initiative and were an estimate of the respondents of this study. The five themes were added to the regression analysis using the forward method. Using the theory-led themes as well as this entry method allowed the regression model to be based on both theoretical and statistical relevance. The conditions for using regression analysis were checked, and no inconsistencies were found. The following section presents the results of both the PCA and the regression analysis.

3.3.3. Characteristics of the sample

A typology of the initiatives was created based on the categories provided by Verhoeven and Tonkens (2011), in which, for example, educational initiatives refer to initiatives that aim to inform specific groups about a topic, and spatial adaptation initiatives improve the infrastructure of the neighbourhood. In Table 3, the initiatives are divided by the category that refers to their main goal. In the regression analysis, presented in the following section, multiple goals are considered. The sample showed that, indeed, many citizens' initiatives in Dutch rural areas focus on delivering a service, namely, 31.2%. Additionally, many initiatives aim to improve social cohesion (21%) and liveability (12.1%).

Table 3: Typology of citizens' initiatives in the sample

Main goal	%
Social cohesion	21.0
Education	3.2
Culture	3.2
Spatial adaptation	22.3
Sports	5.1
Youth	1.3
Liveability	12.1
Service delivery	31.2
Missing	.6

The people involved with citizens' initiatives have been found to be predominantly highly educated men of an older age (50+) (Choi, 2003; McMunn et al., 2009; Munoz et al., 2014; Warburton and Stirling, 2007). In reviewing the characteristics of the initiatives in our sample, we found that the people who were active within the initiatives were more often male (60.4%). Regarding the age distribution, we observed that the age groups of 30–50 (48.4%) and 50 to 65 (45.2%) were nearly equally represented within the initiatives. The initiatives were dominated by citizens who had lived in the area for more than five years, and the participation of locals and newcomers was unequally distributed. On average, the initiatives were made up of 84.8% locals and 15.2% newcomers.

3.4. Results

This section presents the findings from the questionnaire data and consists of two subsections. First, the conceptualizations of success are presented, derived from the PCA. Second, the factors influencing success based on the regression analysis are described.

3.4.1. Founders' conceptualizations of success

Using PCA, clusters of variables were created, revealing three perspectives on success in general: success at the network level, the organizational level and the participant level. These perspectives show parallels with the levels of success described by Provan and Milward (2001) but with the organizational and participant levels as separate approaches towards success. The perspectives and their components are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Results of principal component analysis – three conceptualizations of successful citizens' initiatives

Success perspective	Variables	Cronbach's alpha
Success at the network level	Representative of the neighbourhood/village People from the area participate as well Visibility of the initiative outside the village	.737
Success at the organizational level	Initiators taking responsibility Social capital Trust amongst each other Initiators are in control	.719
Success at the participant level	Developing skills Collective action more important than achieving goals Being a catalyst for other initiatives	.691

First, the perspective of success at the network level includes aspects that refer to the relationships outside the initiative itself. According to this perspective, initiatives are more successful when they represent the neighbourhood or village, when people from outside the initiative participate as well, and when the initiative is known outside the village where it is situated.

Second, in contrast to success at the network level, the perspective on success at the organizational level focuses on the internal characteristics of the initiative. The respondents indicated that when the founders take responsibility for the initiative and when social capital is highly present within it, the initiative is considered to be more successful. Additionally, trust amongst the founders and being in control are said to be aspects of being successful.

The third perspective, success at the participant level, considers the side effects that may accompany initiatives. In contrast to the first two approaches, this perspective focuses on the individual level of the initiatives' participants. Developing personal skills, being active within the initiative – even when the goals are not immediately met – and creating a stimulus for starting new initiatives all determine the success of the initiative according to the respondents' perspective. Success is therefore determined not by the core activities of an initiative but by the effects that result from those activities.

3.4.2 Factors influencing success

Using regression analysis, a model to predict the extent of self-evaluated success has been built. Employing the forward method, independent variables to the analysis in five themes are added. Table 5 presents the results of the analysis with the optimal model for predicting the success of citizens' initiatives. The table includes the variables that contribute significantly to the model; the excluded variables are also presented in Table 2. We will present these results following the five themes of analysis. However, the variables of the theme regarding social relationships did not significantly contribute to the model. This theme will be discussed last.

Initiative characteristics

The variables that are related to the initiative characteristics contributed most significantly to the self-evaluated success of the respondents' own initiative. The number of people involved in the initiative did not have a significant influence on success. Even when we controlled for a mediating or moderating relationship with the type of initiative (goal), we found no significant or strong relationships between the group size and the type of goal. These results indicate that whether

Table 5: Results of regression analysis with the dependent variable ‘how do you rate the success of your initiative on a scale from 1 to 10’

Theme	Variable	Standardized beta	Sig.
Initiative characteristics	Number of people involved	.085	.202
	Development phase	.164	.014
	Feather-light initiatives	-.237	.001
	Cooperative initiatives	-.166	.011
	Goals – preventing vacancies/building re-use	-.226	.000
Functional success	Goals achieved	.416	.000
Input	No involvement with financial means (government/societal organizations)	-.134	.040
Respondents’ suggestions	Failure factor: lack of funds	.149	.018
	Failure factor: interaction with government	-.134	.037
<i>Adjusted R2</i>	<i>.552</i>		

many people were involved in a large initiative or a small group of people was involved in a smaller-scale initiative, for this sample, the group size did not influence the self-evaluated success.

The development phase does influence the self-evaluated success. The respondents evaluated their initiative as more successful once it was developed further. Once an initiative has progressed through the first development phases, the participants judge it to be more successful. However, the better the communication among members functions, the more successful the initiative is considered. Feather-light and cooperative initiatives were less likely to be evaluated as successful, and both types have low degrees of communication with the world outside the initiative. Thus, the network surrounding the initiative seems to contribute to its success. The type of initiative also influences the perception of success. The respondents from initiatives focusing on preventing building vacancies or on the re-use of empty buildings appeared to conceive them as less successful. This finding may be related to the complexity of these types of initiatives because they involve (complex) legislation. However, financial risks and ownership structures also play an important role in the complexity of this kind of initiative.

Functional success

For the theme ‘functional success’, only goal achievement appeared to be significant. The more the participants appreciated the achievement of goals, the more they rated the initiative as successful. This variable has the largest regression coefficient in the prediction model and seems to play the most important role in the self-evaluated success. The other variables relating to the self-evaluated success

were not included in the model.

Input

When there was no involvement of a government or societal organization in terms of finances, this absence negatively impacted the self-evaluated success, illustrating that interaction with the (local) government and other societal organizations (e.g., housing corporations) influenced the self-evaluated success. However, the answers of the respondents to the open questions about success and failure factors indicated other aspects of the governmental role. These results will be discussed in detail in section 4.3.4. The variables ‘community support’ and ‘having a say over the initiative’, both belonging to the theme ‘input’, were not included in the model. Based on our previous study, this finding was unexpected, as the perspective of professionals highly stresses these aspects, relating to the process of initiatives, as important for success (De Haan et al., 2017). The absence of these variables indicates the differences in perspective between the professionals and the founders.

Respondents’ suggestions

The respondents suggested several factors that influence the failure of citizens' initiatives. Two of these factors were significantly influential in predicting the self-evaluated success. First, the role of the government was indicated as a negative influence on the self-evaluated success. In the input theme, a lack of government involvement in terms of finances was perceived as a failure factor. In contrast to governments as suppliers of funds, the presence of the government is perceived as a failure factor under this theme. Moreover, lack of support, bureaucracy, slow pace, and mistrust were provided as examples of negative relationships between initiatives and (local) governments. Respondents who indicated the government as a failure factor also reported lower evaluations of the success of their initiative. We can conclude that the relationship with other institutions is a determinant of successful initiatives that influences them both negatively and positively. Therefore, our findings regarding the role of the government were contradictory. The government is expected to be involved in providing funds, leading to higher ratings of success. However, if there were negative incidents or experiences, the relationship with the government was a negative influence in how the respondents evaluated their initiative's success.

The second significant failure factor indicated by the respondents was a lack of funds. The role of this failure factor stands out in the analysis. Surprisingly, a positive relationship was found between this indicated failure factor and the self-evaluated success: the respondents who indicated a lack of funds as a negative influence on the outcome of their initiative gave higher ratings to the success of their initiative. We expected to find a negative influence in this regard, with an

indicated lack of funds resulting in lower self-evaluated success. A possible explanation for this contradiction is the commitment and skills that are necessary for a lack of funds to become an issue. Being involved with an initiative to such an extent that a founder worries about finances may require a high level of commitment. Although the finances could be troublesome, the involvement and effort of the founders could improve the quality of the initiative to such an extent that the financial drawbacks would be diminished. Furthermore, most respondents indicated in their answers to this question that they viewed a lack of funding as a potential threat and as something they worry about. They did not indicate that there was an actual lack of funds for their initiative at that time.

Social relationships

The variables of one of the themes, social relationships, did not contribute to the model of the self-evaluated success of citizens' initiatives. Since the variables of all the other themes are included in the model, it is striking that social relationships seem to be of importance theoretically but do not play a role in the self-evaluated success. We can conclude from this finding that social dynamics and group processes overall do not contribute significantly to the self-evaluated success of citizens' initiatives.

One possible explanation for the absence of social relationship variables in the model may be that the respondents in the sample rate their initiatives' success rather high (average of 7.89). Although both active and inactive initiatives are included in the sample, in general, the sample consists of rather successful initiatives. It may be possible that when initiatives are perceived as less successful, social relationships play a role. Negative social relationships might prevent initiatives from becoming successful or might inhibit their progress.

Another potential explanation may be found in the respondents. As noted above, each questionnaire was answered by one person leading the initiative because those leaders were expected to be able to provide the most complete information on the initiatives as a whole. It may be that issues relating to the variables of the social relationships theme (e.g., intentions to quit or social capital) in some cases occur outside the purview of the respondent or that the respondent is unaware of the importance of (one of) these aspects for other participants in the initiative.

In summary, the founders adopt three different perspectives on conceptualizing success similar to the classification in the literature: success at the network level, success at the organizational level and success at the participant level. In addition to constructing general conceptualizations of success, the respondents evaluated the success of their own initiative, with a score of 7.89 on average (1–10 scale). Goal achievement seemed to be the most important factor influencing the self-evaluated success, which is remarkable because it is not part of the conceptualization of

success. We conclude that achieving goals is an important aspect that influences the self-evaluated success of a founder's own initiative but is not part of the conceptualization of the success of citizens' initiatives in general. 'Initiatives' characteristics received the most support and included the number of people involved, the development phase, communication levels and type of goals. Aspects related to the social relationships of an initiative were unexpectedly not found to influence the self-evaluated success.

3.5 Conclusions

Investigations of the founders' perspective on successful citizens' initiatives have revealed parallels with the existing body of literature on understanding success (Bock, 2016; Bosworth et al., 2015, 2016; Calderwood and Davies, 2013; Herranz, 2010; Nowell and Boyd, 2014; Provan and Milward, 2001; Salemink, 2016; Taló et al., 2014; De Haan et al., 2017). Where the professionals adopt solely the participant level of success, the founders also consider other perspectives on conceptualizing success. For them, success includes the impact on the world outside the initiative (success at the network level) and the internal characteristics of the initiative (success at the organizational level) as well. However, when the founders judged their own initiative, the general conceptualizations appeared to be of lesser importance, with goal achievement and initiative characteristics as the most important factors explaining the self-evaluated success. Several previous studies noted the importance of goal achievement (Bock, 2016; Sotkasiira et al., 2010; Vickers, 1965), so it is surprising to find this result is not more acknowledged by the professionals involved with citizens' initiatives (De Haan et al., 2017). Moreover, the importance of goal achievement highlights the potential reason to start initiatives and whether goals can and will be achieved and relates to the financial feasibility of initiatives, an important indicator for providing funding. Furthermore, if citizens' initiatives are meant to replace services, it is important that the actual goal of replacing the service is achieved. This output-based approach illustrates the strong link with social entrepreneurship: in order to achieve goals, business principles can be applied, resulting in better feasibility of initiatives. This link seems to have not (yet) been applied by local governments and professionals given their 'soft' approach towards citizens' initiatives (De Haan et al., 2017) where a more business-like model perhaps would lead to better results.

The fact that professionals emphasized empowerment, social learning and collective action in their definition of successful citizens' initiatives in our previous study (De Haan et al., 2017) may indicate an idealization of the social aspects of citizens' initiatives by professionals. The importance of social relations for successful citizens' initiatives was nevertheless illustrated by other authors (Allen and Mueller, 2013; Haggett and Aitken, 2015; Lambru and Petrescu, 2016; Salemink, 2016). The discrepancy with our current findings, that social relations did

not receive support in predicting the self-evaluated success, can be explained by the fact that our sample included initiatives that had already progressed through the first phases of starting an initiative (Munoz et al., 2015; Salemink, 2016). Starting an initiative may require having social relations already in place, making this no longer relevant once the initiative is operating.

Despite our attempt to include inactive initiatives in this study, our results are mainly representative of active citizens' initiatives. The processes of inactive or failed citizens' initiatives and how to prevent or support struggling initiatives thus require more investigation and will be a topic of future research. Nevertheless, these results are relevant for improving our understanding of how to facilitate citizens' initiatives and for providing insight into the complicated relationships between citizens' initiatives and governments in particular. Governments can play an important role in helping initiatives financially, making them more successful. At the same time, a troubled relationship between the government and the initiative was indicated as an important failure factor for initiatives. This tendency was also formulated in the theoretical debate within the Dutch setting (Hurenkamp et al., 2006; Verhoeven and Tonkens, 2011) but was not specified for rural areas. The findings show that the role changes (see, for example, Bosworth et al., 2016; Bovaird and Loeffler, 2012; Pestoff, 2012; Van Meerkerk et al., 2013) that are required in the context of the participation society have not yet been fully implemented and, moreover, have become an obstacle to the success of citizens' initiatives in rural areas. This discrepancy is similar to what Meijer (2016) indicates as an institutional misfit because of the changing roles of both government and citizens. Responsibilities and roles have changed; however, old patterns of behaviour remain. Improving the relationship between government and citizens' initiatives, and ultimately improving the success of citizens' initiatives, is likely to require implementation of these necessary role changes.

Lastly, the question remains as to what extent citizens' initiatives can be seen as a stable and long-term alternative for rural service provision. From our findings, we deduce that role changes and professionalization are necessary. However, in line with the doubts Sud et al. (2009) formulated regarding the capability of social enterprises to resolve social issues, one can seriously question whether founders of citizen initiatives in rural areas have sufficient capabilities to form a long-term alternative for rural service provision.

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*An initiators' perspective on the continuity of
citizens' initiatives in rural areas*

Abstract

Against the backdrop of depopulation and the shift towards Big Society, citizens' initiatives in rural areas are believed to be able to mitigate the decline of service provision in rural regions. Consequently, this mitigation requires the continuity of such initiatives. However, so far, we lack an initiators' perspective on the relevance of this continuity and the factors influencing it. From a theoretical standpoint, continuity of citizens' initiatives can be understood at three levels: the participant, group and initiative level. Based on empirical data obtained from 157 questionnaires distributed to a variety of initiatives, and using regression analysis, the focus of this paper is twofold. First, how and at which level the initiators understand continuity of an initiative is considered. Second, factors influencing the expected continuity of an initiative are researched. The results reveal that continuity differs from merely being successful and is influenced by other factors as well. Furthermore, continuity on the initiative level – the realization of a certain goal – is most prominent in analyzing expected continuity. In conclusion, we explore the roles that citizens' initiatives can be expected to play in service provision and which levels of continuity align with these expectations.

4.1 Introduction

In light of the shift towards the 'Big Society,' citizens' initiatives are often considered to be a potential way of dealing with the loss of public services in rural areas, where such services are under particular pressure (Brannan, John, and Stoker 2006; Cheshire and Woods 2009; Healey 2015; Jones and Little 2000; Shucksmith et al. 2006; Thiede et al. 2017). On the one hand, a number of studies have documented the benefits of citizens' initiatives, showing, for example, how such initiatives can lead to community empowerment and possibly provide alternatives to public service delivery (Bailey and Pill 2015; David, Abreu, and Pinheiro 2013; Diers 2004; Van der Meer et al. 2008; Pestoff 2012; Sellick 2014; Thissen 2010; Vermeij 2015). It has been argued that compared with local governments, citizens may be better able to tailor services to local needs (Healey 2015; Kelly and Caputo 2006; Swanson 2001). On the other hand, some scholars have illustrated the fragility of citizens' initiatives. One potential risk is that not all communities have the ability or opportunity to establish these types of initiatives (Skerratt and Steiner 2013), which can result in social exclusion and the decline of services in some areas or communities (Flinders and Moon 2011; Salemink and Strijker 2016; Westwood 2011). It is also not always clear whether citizens' initiatives necessarily lead to new or stronger social cohesion (as is commonly assumed) (Swanson 2001; Veen 2015; Vermeij 2015) or whether service delivery requires too much effort and time on the part of citizens (Allen and Mueller 2013; Kampen, Verhoeven, and Verplanke 2013; Salemink 2016; Tonkens and De Wilde 2013).

In an effort to better understand the risks and likelihood of citizens' initiatives taking over responsibility for former public services, several studies have focused on factors influencing the success of citizens' initiatives (Jones & Little 2000; Lambriu & Petrescu 2016; Munoz et al. 2015; Salemink & Strijker 2016; Taló et al. 2014; Wiseman 2006). From the viewpoint of professionals, important factors that indicate success are goal achievement and continuity in the sense of continuously active citizens, while premature discontinuation of citizens' initiatives seems to imply failure (de Haan, Meier, et al. 2018). However, that perception is only one side of the story. From the viewpoint of the initiators, continuity and the pressure of goal achievement are more likely to be burdens than signs of success. Thus far, little academic work has engaged with initiators' viewpoints on the need for continuity, the ability to be continuously active, or the individual, collective and contextual aspects that lead to the discontinuation of citizens' initiatives (Salemink 2016). Under the political conditions of the 'Big Society' – or 'Participation Society' as it is known in the Netherlands – and the expectation of citizens taking over services that used to be provided by the government, it is important to gather more insight into the resources and obstacles that affect whether citizens can be continuously active in providing former public services. Therefore, this paper focuses on the initiators' perceptions of continuity and aims to answer the following questions. First, how do founders perceive the continuity of their own initiatives? Second, which aspects or factors influence founders' expectations of the

continuity of citizens' initiatives? Based on survey data gathered in the rural areas of the northern Netherlands, a framework of factors influencing continuity has been developed and estimated using regression analysis. We focus on depopulating rural areas in particular because there – in comparison with growing urban areas – citizens' initiatives play a very important role, as these areas tend to depend on local resources in order to maintain services (Syssner and Meijer 2017). A number of studies have shown that in depopulating rural areas, relatively more citizens' initiatives are launched (Houwelingen, Boele, and Dekker 2014; Syssner and Meijer 2017).

4.2 Conceptualizing citizens' initiatives and continuity

A plethora of concepts are used in reference to the voluntary work of citizens (Bock 2016; Bosworth et al. 2015; Brandsen and Helderma 2012; Fazzi 2011; Kelly and Caputo 2006; Li et al. 2016). In this paper, we use the term citizens' initiatives, which are defined as *formally or informally organized groups of citizens who are active in and contribute to the public domain* (de Haan, Haartsen, et al. 2018; de Haan, Meier, et al. 2018). Following May (2007), citizens' initiatives differ from citizen participation. Participation means – first and foremost – being involved in local governance processes, while citizens' initiatives entail projects in which citizens take the initiative to actively achieve a specific goal together, such as preventing the closure of a local supermarket, maintaining public green areas or arranging elderly care (following the definitions of, for example, Brannan et al. 2006; Calderwood & Davies 2013; Rosol 2012). In these initiatives, the main objective of citizens is either to replace an existing service or facility or to prevent it from disappearing. In the projects we have studied, citizens take the lead, but local or regional governments are sometimes involved in different ways.

Based on the body of literature on citizens' initiatives, continuity seems to refer to the prevention of premature termination and can be understood in multiple ways. First of all, continuity has been considered at the participant-level, exploring why individuals stop or continue their activities. An often mentioned reason for stopping is volunteer burnout (Allen and Mueller 2013), which is caused by the exhaustion of cognitive resources, unclear role patterns or expectations, or a lack of voice within the initiative. Experiencing excessive demands can also lead to a cessation of the initiative (ibid.). The above factors are important because participants in citizens' initiatives who stop their activity have a negative influence on the initiative as a whole. However, individual participants stopping prematurely with an initiative, does not have to be negative for the participant since it then entails stopping the activity which was too strenuous and provides the opportunity to take up other activities.

Volunteers can have a variety of motivations for starting an initiative, but continuation depends on the extent to which the participants feel that the initiative

reflects their motivations (Allison, Okun, and Dutridge 2002; Mallum 2016; van Schie et al. 2015). Welty Peachy et al. (2014) argue that volunteers are inclined to continue with their activities when their motivations for starting an initiative are fulfilled. Reasons for remaining committed, and thus reasons for the continuity of initiatives on the participant-level, can be found in individual motivations. Newton et al. (2014) found a positive influence of learning and development opportunities on the motivation of volunteers to remain committed to an organization such as a citizens' initiative. The stronger the motivation of volunteers to participate is, the higher their level of commitment and intentions to continue. Especially, motives related to developing self-esteem have a positive effect on the intention to stay committed, while career motives seem to provide weaker motivation to stay committed.

Second, continuity can also be considered in relation to the entire group of participants in the citizens' initiative. Several studies have explored the role of social relations at the initiative level. Brandsen & Helderman (2012) argue that the success of citizens' initiatives depends on the long-term maintenance of group boundaries and on the development of an organizational form, i.e., clear task division and agreement on the course of action. The use of democratic principles in decision-making is also essential. When goals and viewpoints are shared within the group, the initiative is usually able to continue in the longer term once it is off the ground. Other authors have also found social relations and social capital to be important (Jicha et al. 2011; Lambru and Petrescu 2016; Liu and Besser 2003). Social relations relate to relationships among the participants as well as to reciprocity, leadership roles and decision-making capabilities. The better these processes are organized, the more likely the initiative is to succeed.

Despite the negative effects on the initiative as a whole, individual or group discontinuity, does not necessarily have to be problematic for the initiative, since replacing stopped initiators can still lead to continuation of the initiative. Therefore, in addition to considering continuity with regard to a participant or a group, thirdly, continuity can also be considered at the initiative level, i.e., with regard to the existence of the initiative over time – despite changes in group membership – until the goal is achieved. Existence over time requires finding successors when the current participants stop being involved in the initiative. Continuity in terms of goal achievement depends on the type of goal the initiative focuses on. Initiatives may have a goal that is similar to that of a project; once the goal is achieved, there is no longer any need for the initiative. Examples of these types of goals are building a children's playground that requires no maintenance or creating a new meeting place for the elderly. For these types of initiatives, continuity seems to be of lesser importance. On the other hand, initiatives can have goals that require continuing the initiative once the goal is achieved. Examples of this type of goal include managing an (otherwise closed) supermarket, acquiring sustainable energy for a village, or providing an alternative to social housing. For these initiatives, continuity is important because stopping the initiative would result in the disappearance of the

service or facility it provided. It should be noted here that goals are not fixed entities for citizens' initiatives, they can change over time during the development of the initiative (De Haan et al. 2018). As such, the required continuity can shift as well, from an initiative being continuous by achieving a goal to an initiative being continuous by the maintenance of a goal.

De Haan et al. (2018) discussed the role of goal achievement in relation to success. According to professionals, achieving goals is not the same as success; however, the initiative being active, and thus existing over time, is considered a form of success (ibid.). This perspective contradicts the viewpoint of initiators and raises the issue of the differences between the concepts of success and continuity. Existing over time can also indicate a struggle to achieve goals, and as such be an indicator of failure instead of success. There is clearly a relationship between these concepts, as it is likely that the continuity of an initiative depends on its success. However, it remains unclear whether continuity and success are the same thing and whether initiators relate success to continuity in the same way as professionals do. Therefore, this paper focuses on the perspective of initiators.

In order to understand the concept of continuity and its relationship with success, this analysis includes factors known to influence success (de Haan, Haartsen, et al. 2018). These factors can be divided into four themes (ibid.): the characteristics of the initiative, functional success, social relations and input. First, examples of the characteristics of the initiative are the type of goal that the initiative is pursuing and that goal's connectedness with the neighborhood. Second, functional success can be understood as the concrete output and results of an initiative. Third, examples of social relations within the initiative are leadership roles and trust. And finally, the input an initiative receives refers, for example, to particular skills and a sense of ownership over the initiative. Previously, these themes were studied in relation to perceived levels of success. In the current analysis, these four themes will be analyzed in their relation to continuity.

4.3 Methodology

4.3.1 Research area and sample

The dataset for this study contains information from a questionnaire on citizens' initiatives in the rural areas of the northern provinces of the Netherlands. We selected this research area because it is currently experiencing or expected to experience depopulation. The questionnaire was specifically aimed at initiatives related to maintaining or improving (former public) services and livability, such as initiatives that take care of a public green area. Questions were related to the three levels of continuity and to the four themes of factors influencing success.

An inventory of both active and discontinued citizens' initiatives was conducted. In order to build the inventory, we relied on various sources, such as information

provided by local and regional governments, planning bureaus and an internet search conducted by the researchers. Moreover, we adopted the snowball method and used various websites to place calls to complete the questionnaire; we chose this approach because our informants noted that there are also – in many cases smaller-scale – citizens' initiatives that operate without governmental or other forms of support, such as funding or professional help (Green and Goetting 2010). In general, these initiatives remain unknown to our informants and were therefore initially not part of the inventory. So that we could include these initiatives, the respondents who filled out the questionnaire were asked whether they knew of other initiatives in the area. The initiatives mentioned were included in the inventory, and their participants received a questionnaire later on. Despite our efforts to minimize the bias against invisible initiatives, we are aware that our inventory does not provide an exhaustive list of citizens' initiatives. Nevertheless, given the wide variety of initiatives and the large number included in the sample, our findings seem to be representative despite this limitation.

In total, 623 founders of citizens' initiatives were included in the inventory, of which 491 received an invitation to complete the questionnaire by e-mail and 95 by traditional mail. No contact details were available for thirty-seven of the 623 initiatives, and one postal address no longer existed, resulting in a total of 585 initiatives being invited to respond. To increase the response rate, the invitation explained that three randomly selected participants would be rewarded with a €20 voucher, and reminders were sent after two weeks. In total, 157 respondents completed the survey, resulting in a response rate of 26.8%. Although both active and inactive citizens' initiatives were included in the inventory, the questionnaire was predominantly completed by founders of active initiatives (86%). Since only a small number of stopped initiatives responded, it was not possible to include an analysis on factors influencing continuity of stopped citizens' initiatives and compare this with initiatives with ongoing continuity. Therefore, it is important to be aware that in the analysis only those initiatives are included who had, up until the point of the data collection, not stopped prematurely, and thus, are continuous. However, it seems to fit best to study continuity when it is ongoing, since expectations of continuity and the factors influencing it can be considered. As such, the data contribute to better understanding the concept of continuity by providing insights into the aspects which are perceived by the respondents to influence continuity.

All initiatives contained in the inventory received only one invitation and were asked to fill out the questionnaire once. Because the participants stated the name of their initiative, it was possible to check whether multiple questionnaires per initiative were returned, and no duplications occurred. In order to attain information on initiative level, we preferred the questionnaire to be filled out by (one of) the leader(s) of the initiative. The invitation stated this preference and made clear that the questionnaire was intended for the founder or someone in the lead of the initiative. The preference for questioning the founders of initiatives was

based on our expectation that this person would have the most complete overview of all the activities included in the initiative. Nevertheless, when interpreting the results, it should be recognized that they are based on the viewpoint of one initiator who spoke for the entire initiative.

4.3.2 Operationalizations and Analysis

The concept of continuity in citizens' initiatives is not unambiguously defined within the literature. In order to operationalize continuity, the dependent variable, the respondents were asked what their expectations were regarding the lifespan of their initiative. The respondents could indicate in years how long they expected their initiative to remain active. Four answer categories were available for the respondents: less than one year, one to three years, three to five years and longer than five years. A total of 135 respondents answered this question. The dependent variable was included as a discrete variable in the analysis.

Using regression analysis, we constructed a model to predict the expected continuity of citizens' initiatives. Since, so far, little is known about factors influencing continuity, we derive the independent variables from known success and failure factors, following from a study on success of citizens' initiatives. As such, the independent variables were related to initiative characteristics, functional success, social relations and input and were included in the analysis (de Haan, Haartsen, et al. 2018). Furthermore, respondents' suggestions on success and failure factors were included in the analysis. Table 1 provides an overview of all the independent variables per theme. The following will provide a brief description of these themes of independent variables.

The first theme, initiative characteristics, consists of seven independent variables related to the general characteristics of citizens' initiatives. Respondents were asked, amongst others, to indicate the development phase of their initiative, ranging from the initial starting phase (1) to being in operation (5). Also, an open ended question allowed the respondents to describe the goals of the initiative, which were categorized into 13 dummy variables. Examples of initiative goals which came forward are: livability, internet access, services and health care.

Functional success, the second theme in the analysis, includes five variables. This theme concerns the concrete results of the initiatives, such as self-evaluated level of success and goal achievement. On a scale ranging from one to ten, the respondents indicated to what extent they considered their initiatives as successful. Goal achievement was operationalized by asking the respondents to what extent, on a five-point scale, they considered the initiative goals to be achieved. A score of 1 indicated the goals not at all being achieved, and 5 completely having achieved the goals. By formulating the question in this way, the analysis allowed for the adaptability of goals, which can, depending on the development of the initiative,

change over time. The question referred to the current state of goal achievement, not necessarily the extent to which the initial goals of the initiative are achieved.

The third theme, social relations, concerns the social aspect of citizens' initiatives and consists of five variables. For example, the respondents were asked who started the initiative, with eight answering options. Also, an inquiry was made of whether or not group-members had stopped with their activities for the initiative. Another aspect, social capital, is also included in this theme. The respondents could indicate which level of social capital is present in their initiative.

The input theme includes nine variables. This fourth theme concerns the roles and skills related to citizens' initiatives. The initiators can feel responsible for the initiatives and have leadership, but also professionals, or governmental organizations can be involved. Therefore, who has a say over the initiative is one of the independent variables. Furthermore, the respondents could indicate on a one to five scale, whether knowledge and skills were sufficiently present.

The fifth theme includes the respondents' suggestions on success and failure factors. The questionnaire included an open-ended question in which the respondents could indicate which success and failure factors were present within their initiatives. The answers were classified into different dummy-variables and were also included in the analysis. Urgency, enthusiasm, autonomy and sufficient financial funds are examples of the success factors that were mentioned. Examples of failure factors are the relationship with a government, a lack of financial funds and a lack of time. In total, 11 success factors and 10 failure factors were categorized and included as independent variables.

Lastly, we included the control variables for the analysis to control for the influence of gender, age, the presence of newcomers vs. locals, and education levels. All the control variables were measured at the level of the initiative and were estimated by the respondents. The respondents could indicate the ratio of men and women within the initiative, as well as the ratio of locals and newcomers (i.e. residents living in the area for more than five years or less than five years). Furthermore, the respondents were asked to estimate the age of the participants of the initiative and provide an average age for the initiative as a whole. The fourth and last control variable indicates the percentage of lower, middle and higher educated participants within the initiative.

Because the concept of the continuity of citizens' initiatives has not been researched extensively thus far and the literature does not provide clear starting points for the analysis, we added the variables in the regression analysis using the forward entry method. The conditions for using regression analysis were checked, and no inconsistencies were found.

Table 1: Themes and variables for regression analysis (dependent variable ‘expected duration of continuing the initiative’)

Theme	Question/Variable	Continuity level	Variable characteristics	Answer options
Initiative characteristics	No. of years of existence	Initiative level	Numeric	Years in numbers
	Development phase	Initiative level	5 answer options	Start; inventory; group coalescence; formalization; operational phase
	No. of people involved	Group level	Numeric	Number of people
	Time investment of initiative leader	Participant level	Numeric	Number of hours per week
	Type of goals	Initiative level	13 dummy categories	Open question
	Levels of communication	Group level	4 answer options	High vs. low levels and internal vs. external communication
Functional success	Type of financing	Initiative level	4 answer options	Governmental; societal organization; both; none
	Goal achievement	Initiative level	Scale 1-5	1 Not at all – 5 completely
	When satisfied with initiative	Participant level	4 answer options	Never satisfied; when operational; when goals achieved; already satisfied
	Reputation	Group level	Scale 1-5	1 Low – 5 high
	Continuation by others in case of stopping	Group level	Nominal	Yes; no
	Level of success	Initiative level	Scale 1-10	Grade for experienced level of success 1-10
Social relations	Who started initially	Group level	8 answer options	Fellow villager(s) and/or neighbor(s); (group) friend(s); myself; existing association; local government; regional government; societal organization; other
	Familiar with each other before starting	Group level	4 answer options	Yes; some, but not all; no; no other initiators
	Stopped members	Group level	Nominal	Yes; no
	Intentions to quit	Participant level	4 answer options	Yes, soon; yes, within a year; yes, in a few years; no

	Social capital					
Input	No. of professionals	Group level	Scale 1-5	1 Low – 5 high		
	Involvement of government/organizations	Initiative level	Numeric	Number of professionals		
	Community support	Initiative level	Nominal	Involvement or not in supplying goods; professionals; network; knowledge		
	Who has say over the initiative	Group level	7 answer options	Yes; no		
	Feeling responsible for goal achievement	Participant level	Scale 1-5	Initiators; village; multiple villages; local government; regional government; professional(s); other		
	Who is responsible for continuation	Initiative level	7 answer options	1 not responsible – 5 very responsible		
Respondents' suggestions	Reasons to stop	Participant level	Scale 1-5	Villagers; local government; regional government; societal organization; professional; nobody, other		
	Knowledge and skills	Group level	Scale 1-5	1 not relevant – 5 very relevant for 9 potential reasons to stop		
	Leadership	Group level	Nominal	1 not present – 5 all present		
	Success factors present in initiative	Initiative & group level	11 dummy categories	Yes; no		
	Failure factors present in initiative	Initiative & group level	10 dummy categories	Open question		
				Open question		
Control variables	Gender	Group level	Numeric	% of men and women		
	Average age	Group level	Numeric	Average age of participants		
	Newcomers or stayers	Group level	Numeric	% of newcomers and stayers		
	Education level	Group level	Numeric	% of lower, middle and higher educated participants		

4.4 Results

This results section first presents the characteristics of the citizens' initiatives included in our dataset. Second, the factors influencing the expected continuity based on the regression analysis are described.

4.4.1 Characteristics of citizens' initiatives

Our sample includes relatively large initiatives: on average, 24 people are actively involved in each initiative. The initiatives that were not initially part of the inventory but were approached via websites or snowballing consist, on average, of 27 people, illustrating that citizens' initiatives operating outside the scope of our informants are not necessarily smaller-scale initiatives. Furthermore, the participants spend an average of 6.7 hours per week on their initiatives. A total of 18.5% of the questionnaires were completed by the current initiative leader who had also founded the initiative. Looking at who starts these types of initiatives, the data illustrate that the initiatives were mostly launched by fellow villagers (31.8%) and by associations that already existed (28.7%).

Most (31.2%) of the citizens' initiatives in the rural areas of the northern Netherlands have the goal of delivering a service. Table 2 present the typology of the citizens' initiatives in the sample. Additionally, many of these initiatives aim to facilitate social cohesion (21%) and to contribute to livability (12.1%). The initiatives focusing on youth have the smallest numbers of participants, with an average of only 5. The other types of initiatives consist of groups ranging from 11 to 34 individuals.

Table 2: Typology of citizens' initiatives in the sample

Main goal	%
Social cohesion	21.0
Education	3.2
Culture	3.2
Spatial adaptation	22.3
Sports	5.1
Youth	1.3
Livability	12.1
Service delivery	31.2
Missing	.6

On average, the initiatives have existed for 9.3 years. In general, the founders appear to be rather positive about the continuity of their initiative: 57.3% of the respondents expect their initiatives to exist for at least another five years. A small group of respondents (5.1%) expects their initiatives to stop within a year. This

result can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, the expectation that an initiative will exist for more than five years can be related to the long-term goals of the initiative. On the other hand, such an expectation can also reflect the belief that it will take a long time, for any reason, before the goal is achieved.

Looking at the background characteristics of the people involved with the initiatives, we found that more men than women contribute to initiatives: 60.4% of the participants within initiatives were male. Regarding the ages of those involved in the initiatives, we observed that the age groups of 30 to 50 years (48.4%) and 50 to 65 years (45.2%) were of nearly the same size. Furthermore, the participation of locals (those who had been part of the community for more than five years) and newcomers was unequally distributed. On average, the initiatives were made up of 84.8% locals and 15.2% newcomers.

4.4.2 Factors influencing the expected continuity of citizens' initiatives

Looking at the significant results of the regression analysis (see table 3), no single, specific theme emerges as the most prominent in explaining the expected continuity of citizens' initiatives. Rather, continuity can be explained by a combination of themes. Except for that of initiative characteristics, all the themes play a role in predicting expected continuity. Considering the level of continuity, the level of the initiative is most prominent, but all three levels are represented in the findings. Six variables proved to have a significant influence on the expected continuity of citizens' initiatives.

Within the *Functional success* theme, two variables are significant. First, goal achievement influences expected continuity. The further the initiative has progressed in achieving its goals, the higher the respondents estimate the continuity of the initiative. It seems that achieving results reduces the respondents' uncertainty about the future of the initiative. And as such, continuity seems not to be a sign of struggling to achieve results. Given the role of goal achievement in the success of citizens' initiatives (de Haan, Haartsen, et al. 2018; de Haan, Meier, et al. 2018), we expected that the type of goals would also play a role in the expected continuity. As noted in the conceptualization, continuity can entail the achievement of a goal or the maintenance of a particular goal. Initiatives focusing on a single goal that does not require the initiative to be operational after the goal is achieved could imply that continuity is of lesser importance. Where initiatives have goals that require the maintenance of the initiative, such as the provision of housing, we expected to find that the founders of these types of initiatives would also expect their initiatives to continue for longer periods of time. However, this was not the case. Achieving goals leads to higher levels of expected continuity, regardless of the type of goals. It should be kept in mind that these findings are related to the current goals of the initiatives, and not necessarily - since goals can develop and change over time - the initial goals of the initiatives.

Table 3: Results of forward regression analysis on expected continuity of citizens' initiatives

Theme	Variable	Continuity level	B coefficient (Standard Error)	t	sig
Functional success	Goals achieved	Initiative level	.268 (.067)	4.022	.000
	Satisfied with initiative – when goals achieved	Participant level	-.373 (.144)	-2.599	.011
Social relations	Who started initially – fellow villager(s)	Group level	.353 (.155)	2.286	.025
Input	Government involvement – access to knowledge	Initiative level	-.587 (.214)	-2.739	.007
	Reasons to stop – no more energy	Participant level	.136 (.057)	2.390	.019
Respondents' suggestions	Success factor - urgency	Initiative level	.368 (.155)	2.517	.013

Adjusted R2 = 30.6%
N = 110

The second significant variable in the *Functional success* theme also relates to goal achievement. The respondents were asked when they would be satisfied with the initiative. Being satisfied with the initiative when goals are achieved has a negative influence on expected continuity. In other words, the respondents expect their initiative to continue for a shorter duration. Being satisfied simply when goals are achieved seems to be inconsistent with a long-term view, which is probably needed to ensure the continuity of citizens' initiatives. Therefore, ideas about when initiators are satisfied with their initiative will influence continuity, illustrating that citizens' initiatives not only revolve around the primary goal but also serve other purposes. This finding is also supported by previous studies, where professionals stress the importance of the side-effects that follow from these types of initiatives (de Haan, Meier, et al. 2018). It should be noted here, however, that this finding can also be explained by the notion that not all type of goals require continuity of the initiative, but end once the goal is achieved and as such, are successful.

We expected that the *Social relations* theme would play a relatively large role in the continuity of citizens' initiatives. For example, a participant wanting to stop the initiative could let the group processes – and therefore the outcomes – be disrupted. However, the Social relations theme includes only one significant variable. A possible explanation for this finding is that the initiators who filled out the questionnaire have a more positive outlook because of social desirability.

The significant variable within the *Social relations* theme is 'which group of people initially start a citizens' initiative.' When fellow villagers had initially started the initiative, respondents expected that initiative to continue for a longer period of time. Sharing a certain goal with people living in the same village seems to enhance the relevance of that goal, increasing the importance of the initiative and resulting in higher levels of expected continuity. Also, here an explanation can be found in the people who must take over when others drop out: if someone stops participating, there are others within the village with the same goal and willingness to continue the initiative.

The *Input* theme contains two significant variables. The first significant variable is the involvement of the government. If governmental involvement takes the form of providing access to knowledge, for example by introducing an expert from their network, there is a negative influence on expected continuity. This finding indicates that governmental support – when it takes the form of providing access to knowledge – is not necessarily beneficial for the continuation of initiatives. Based on these results, government support seems not to contribute to the continuity of citizens' initiatives; or, government support should be improved and better adapted to the needs of these initiatives in order to be beneficial for continuity.

The second significant variable in the *Input* theme concerns reasons to stop. Respondents were asked to what extent a certain aspect could be a reason to stop their activities for the initiative. The respondents indicated that 'being depleted of

energy for the initiative' can be a reason to stop. However, when the variable was included in the regression analysis, there was a positive relationship between the variable and expected continuity. In other words, the higher the importance given to being depleted of energy as a reason for stopping, the higher the estimation of the initiative's expected continuity. A possible explanation for this finding is that the continuity of an initiative is not solely determined by the threat of losing the input of one of the initiators. Seemingly, the respondents trust on their fellow initiators to continue with the initiative even if they themselves no longer have the energy to contribute.

One variable is significant in the *Respondents' suggestions* theme: urgency as a success factor. There is a positive relationship between the urgency of the initiative and the expected continuity of initiatives. It appears that urgency provides legitimacy and relevance for the initiative. The urgency of the initiatives seems to raise the expectation that the initiatives will also exist for longer periods of time. Serving a purpose that is supported and seen as important on the community or village level appears to provide the founders of initiatives with trust in the continuation of their efforts.

None of the background characteristics were found to have a significant influence on the expected continuity of citizens' initiatives. Even though, continuation by others when a participant stops, i.e., transferring responsibilities in order to maintain the initiative, was expected to be related to the continuity of an initiative as a whole. Remarkably, the variable 'continuation by others in case of stopping' was not significant in this analysis. A possible explanation for this finding is that the participants do not look beyond their own role in the initiative and do not focus on transferring responsibilities, in case of stopping. Stopping seems not to be an option to consider. This blindspot regarding transferring responsibilities and continuation by others can be a vulnerability of citizens' initiatives and should be addressed through policy. Maintaining the services provided by citizens' initiatives requires the consideration of possible successors in the event that someone stops participating.

4.5 Conclusions

This paper discusses founders' perspectives on the continuity of citizens' initiatives. The concept of continuity was analyzed at different levels. The initiative-level of continuity emerged as the most prominent, meaning that continuity until the goal is achieved is considered the most important level of continuity. However, the group and participant levels surfaced as well, via the influence on continuity of who started the initiative, the reasons for stopping and the time at which the initiators are satisfied with the initiative. Considering the discussion of whether citizens' initiatives are a stable alternative to service provision, these findings are reassuring because the initiatives seem to be less fragile than expected (Allen and Mueller

2013; Flinders and Moon 2011; Westwood 2011). The continuity of initiatives is less dependent on the continuity of individuals or the group of initiators but more strongly related to continuity until the goal is achieved on the initiative level.

In addition to the level of continuity, the expected continuity was estimated and factors influencing expected continuity were analyzed. The empirical data illustrated that expected continuity is influenced by factors related to functional success, social relations and input. Surprisingly, there is not one theme of factors that is particularly dominant in explaining and understanding expected continuity. A striking result is the role of goal achievement in the expected continuity of citizens' initiatives. On the one hand, achieving the initiative's goal predicts higher expected continuity of the initiative at the initiative level. This finding could reflect higher levels of confidence in the initiative once a start has been made toward goal achievement. On the other hand, there is a negative influence on expected continuity when the initiators are satisfied with the initiative once its goals are achieved. This finding can be related to the relevant side-effects of citizens' initiatives (de Haan, Meier, et al. 2018), as citizens' initiatives are not only valuable for the goals they achieve but also for the learning experiences they provide. Another explanation can be found in initiatives with goals that do not require maintenance, and as such continuity, once the goals are achieved.

Also, in the analysis the role of the government came forward. Government involvement, in terms of providing access to knowledge, appeared to have a negative effect on expected continuity. This finding seems to point towards an, at times, troubled relationship between citizens' initiatives and government institutions (De Haan, Haartsen, et al. 2018; Hurenkamp et al. 2016; Verhoeven en Tonkens 2011). Government institutions need a balance in providing support on the one hand, but without interfering too much with the process of the initiatives on the other hand (ibid.). This study illustrated that this balance is not only required for successful initiatives, but also applies to the continuity of initiatives.

Furthermore, the analysis reveals that continuity is influenced by factors other than perceived success (de Haan, Haartsen, et al. 2018), illustrating that success and continuity are two different concepts. However, both concepts are relevant to goal achievement. Goal achievement is necessary for both success and continuity. The expectation that success is a condition for continuity was not supported by our findings because the level of success was not one of the factors influencing continuity.

Research on citizens' initiatives, particularly in rural areas where services are under pressure (Brannan et al. 2006; Cheshire and Woods 2009; Healey 2015; Jones and Little 2000; Shucksmith et al. 2006), raises the issue of the relevance of continuity. Based on our findings, citizens' initiatives can be continuous on the initiative level, both by being temporal with an end-date (achieving the goal) and by continuing over time (maintenance of the goal). This issue comes down to the existing

expectations of citizens' initiatives with regards to their role in service provision. If these types of initiatives are expected to serve as a replacement for services and facilities, then continuity on the initiative-level is indeed important in order to maintain livability. Therefore, the importance and level of continuity depend on the existing expectations of citizens' initiatives.

When citizens' initiatives are seen as a replacement for services and facilities, another issue arises: can this level of responsibility and provision of continuity be expected of the volunteers who are active in these initiatives? In other words, are citizens' initiatives the appropriate alternative when seeking to replace services and facilities? Brannan et al. (2006) also addressed this question and argued that the costs and benefits should be in balance for both (local) governments and communities. Considering this issue, attention should be paid to which level of continuity is suitable for the given situation and thus which level of continuity can be expected. Moreover, our findings illustrate that participants in citizens' initiatives seem not to anticipate or be prepared for the potential transfer of responsibilities when a participant stops being involved. Thus, professionals supporting citizens' initiatives should raise awareness and contribute to facilitating this transfer in order to establish continuity on the initiative level.

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*‘At some point it has been enough’ - Processes
of perceived failure of citizens’ initiatives*

ABSTRACT

Citizens' initiatives are believed to be a suitable alternative approach to service provision, especially in rural areas where services and facilities are under pressure because of depopulation and the decentralization measures of the state. To date, research has mainly focused on successful examples of these types of initiatives, revealing which factors influence success and how success can be facilitated. However, understanding the process of failure is equally important in order to provide the needed support and to increase the chances of success. This paper specifically focuses on citizens' initiatives that are perceived by their initiators to have failed. This study adopts an integral approach, not only focusing on failure factors but also considering failure as a process. Within the literature, six obstacles to the success of citizens' initiatives were identified based on studies of success. Three case studies on failed citizens' initiatives in the Northern Netherlands revealed three themes in the process of perceived failure: interactions with governments and institutions, appropriation and personal investment. We also conclude that the process of perceived failure is dominated by a discrepancy of scale because citizens' initiatives operate on the local level, yet they depend on and must interact with governments and institutions that operate at the regional level.

5.1 Introduction

Local transport to schools, a village living room, community shops and community gardens: these and other examples of successful citizens' initiatives are widespread throughout the media and have been subjected to numerous evaluations (see for example: Bultsma, van der Veen, & Hitzert, 2015; Drent, 2017; Groninger Dorpen, 2015; Jonker-Verkaart & Lupi, 2017; Provincie Groningen, 2017; van der Veen, 2017; Visser, Lupi, & Dorenbos, 2016). In the context of the Big Society, local and regional governments encourage the transfer of responsibilities to citizens' initiatives because of their potential to create customized alternatives in public service provision (Brannan et al. 2006; Cheshire & Woods 2009; Healey 2015; Jones & Little 2000; Shucksmith et al. 2006; Thiede et al. 2017). A drawback of the existing body of literature on citizens' initiatives is that the focus is mostly on successful initiatives (Meijer 2017; Taló et al. 2014; Wandersman 2009). This focus results in a bias towards best practices and leaves the processes and consequences of unsuccessful citizens' initiatives under-researched. Although some factors that contribute to the failure of citizens' initiatives have been identified in studies on best practices (de Haan, Haartsen, et al. 2018), the interrelatedness of these factors and the failure process has thus far been neglected in research.

The aim of this paper is to shed light on the processes that lead to the failure of citizens' initiatives. The focus is not merely on factors contributing to failure as such; rather, an integral approach is adopted in order to understand failure as a process composed of interrelated factors. By using three cases within depopulating areas in the northern rural areas of the Netherlands, the following research question will be answered: *How can the processes by which citizens' initiatives fail be described and explained?* The cases are examples of what we call failed citizens' initiatives, as the initiators perceive them as such. This does not automatically mean that the initiatives have stopped entirely. This paper first explores the existing literature on citizens' initiatives and factors influencing their failure, followed by a description of the methods used. Finally, the findings of the case study are described, and conclusions regarding failed citizens' initiatives are presented.

5.2 Obstacles and risks for citizens' initiatives

Given the aforementioned shift towards the Big Society, citizen participation in the public domain has received considerable attention within current research (de Haan, Haartsen, et al. 2018; de Haan, Meier, et al. 2018b). Different concepts are used to describe the same general form of voluntary collaboration among citizens, including grassroots initiatives, social innovation, bottom-up social enterprises and social cooperatives (Bock 2016; Bosworth et al. 2015; Brandsen & Helderman 2012; Fazzi 2011; de Haan, Meier, et al. 2018b; Kaehne 2015; Kelly & Caputo 2006; Li et al. 2016). We prefer to use the concept of citizens' initiatives because these initiatives not only imply involvement in local governance processes (May 2007)

but also focus on realizing specific goals, such as replacing an existing facility or service (following the definitions of, for example, Brannan et al. 2006; Calderwood & Davies 2013; Rosol 2012). We define citizens' initiatives as *formally or informally organized groups of citizens who are active in and contribute to the public domain* (de Haan, Meier, et al. 2018b; de Haan, Haartsen, et al. 2018).

Many studies have focused on the success of citizens' initiatives and the factors influencing this success (see, for example, Allen & Mueller, 2013; Beer, 2014; Haggett & Aitken, 2015; Lambrou & Petrescu, 2016; Munoz, Steiner, & Farmer, 2015; Neumeier, 2012; O'Shaughnessy & O'Hara, 2016; Salemink, 2016; Salemink & Strijker, 2016; Steiner & Atterton, 2014; Verhoeven & Tonkens, 2011; Wiseman, 2006). In the present study, the focus is on the process of perceived failure as defined by the initiators and perceived by the stakeholders involved. There is no explicit definition of the failure of citizens' initiatives, but it is likely that success and failure function on a continuum: not being successful to a certain extent implies that the citizens' initiative has failed (de Haan, Haartsen, et al. 2018). Initiatives that never materialize due to of a lack of social capital, sense of urgency or low educational levels, for example, can also be considered as failures (Salemink & Strijker 2018). However, the focus of this paper is explicitly on citizens' initiatives that have started and progressed in their development but are perceived to have failed by the initiators themselves. In reviewing the existing literature on the failure of citizens' initiatives, several contributing factors emerge. Additionally, the absence of factors identified as success factors (de Haan, Meier, et al. 2018b; de Haan, Haartsen, et al. 2018), such as a lack of skills within the initiators group or an insufficient network, could be considered a factor in failure. This paper focuses specifically on the process of failure of citizens' initiatives and thus on particular factors that contribute to failure. Based on the literature review, six aspects appear to create the largest obstacles and risks to citizens' initiatives: not representing the community, volunteer burnout, scale, insufficient financial means, the relationship with government and existing and changing policies. These aspects will be discussed in the following section.

Not representing the community can influence the failure of citizens' initiatives. Representation can take two forms: representation of the composition of the community and representation of the interests of the community. Regarding representation of the community's composition, Tonkens and Verhoeven (2018) note that representation within citizens' initiatives is largely distributed unequally, as highly educated, white, male, middle-aged community members are usually overrepresented. Nevertheless, representation plays an important role in the success and failure of citizens' initiatives because it supports the community in developing and improving its initiatives. Edelenbos et al. (2016) further illustrate the importance of representing the interests of the community. Representing the interests of the community provides the initiative with legitimacy and thus increases its chances of success. Not being representative of the community can lead to a loss of legitimacy and often results in the failure of citizens' initiatives.

Another aspect of failure that is often highlighted in the existing literature is **volunteer burnout**. Citizens' initiatives can fail when participants stop their activities, and one cause of such stoppage is volunteer burnout. Being involved with a citizens' initiative can place immense pressure on the participants because they invest so much of their time, energy and skills in the initiative. Experiencing too much strain as a result of their participation in the initiative can lead to volunteer burnout and may cause the participants to quit their activities entirely (Allen & Mueller 2013; Salemink & Strijker 2016).

The **scale** at which the initiatives operate can also influence failure. Citizens' initiatives mostly operate at the local level and are more likely to succeed at that level. Sometimes, the goals of citizens' initiatives concern the regional level, e.g., maintaining public transport for a region. Operating at the regional level involves a higher level of complexity for the citizens' initiatives, since more complex and increasingly diverse legislation is required and generating support becomes more complicated. Operating on the regional level can thus be a failure factor for citizens' initiatives (Meijer 2018; Salemink & Strijker 2018).

Insufficient financial means is another factor that can contribute to failure (de Haan, Haartsen, et al. 2018; Salemink & Strijker 2016; Salemink & Strijker 2018). Citizens' initiatives progress through several stages (de Haan, Haartsen, et al. 2018; Munoz et al. 2015; Salemink & Strijker 2016; Salemink & Strijker 2018). Once the goals are set and a stable group has formed, it is essential to secure sufficient funding to continue to develop further and achieve the initiative's goals. In general, an important source of funding is local and regional governments. Lack of financial involvement from these governments can have a negative influence on the success of citizens' initiatives (de Haan, Haartsen, et al. 2018). The importance of finances is not always acknowledged by professionals who, in some cases, focus mostly on the positive side effects of the development of citizens' initiatives, such as learning experiences for the participants (de Haan, Meier, et al. 2018b).

The **relationship between citizens' initiatives and the government** stands out as a critical factor when analysing the failure of citizens' initiatives. The success of citizens' initiatives largely depends on the (financial) support of (local) governments (de Haan, Haartsen, et al. 2018; Nederhand et al. 2016). However, a weakened or troubled relationship with the government can also contribute to initiatives not succeeding and is perceived by initiators as an important failure factor (de Haan, Haartsen, et al. 2018). In the context of the shift towards the Big Society, citizens' initiatives require changes from local and regional governments, i.e., letting go of responsibilities and transferring this responsibility to citizens (Björstig & Sandström 2017; Bosworth et al. 2016; Bovaird & Loeffler 2012; Van Meerkerk et al. 2013; Pestoff 2012). However, existing institutional structures remain as they are despite the procedural changes required to support citizens' initiatives and to enable them to take over responsibilities. Meijer (2016) refers to this as an institutional misfit because these required changes in role patterns for both governments and citizens

often have not yet been put into practice. Van Dam et al. (2015) argue that once governmental organizations formulate their expectations of active citizens and thus make the changes necessary to transfer responsibilities to citizens, this shift can have a performative effect for citizens. The performative effect entails a tendency for citizens' initiatives to be shaped by the expectations and actions of governmental organizations. As such, by formulating expectations that include the new role patterns, the performative effect could decrease the supposed misfit because it would include the changes that are essential to the initiative's success.

In the literature, **existing and changing policies** also emerge as an obstacle when further considering the relationship between initiatives and governments. Existing policies can contradict the interests and plans of citizens' initiatives and become an obstacle to the realization of those plans (Bosworth et al. 2015; Curry 2012; Salemink & Strijker 2016). Elections can contribute to a shift in political power and to new political priorities, and as a result, new policy choices can contradict citizens' initiatives (Edelenbos et al. 2017; Salemink & Strijker 2018). Several authors argue that citizens' initiatives should align with existing policy to increase their chances of success (see, for example, Bisschops & Beunen 2018; Li et al. 2016; Nederhand et al. 2016). Furthermore, policies prescribe the pace at which governments can operate, which results in an inability to follow the pace of citizens' initiatives, and thus the inflexibility of governments can frustrate the process of citizens' initiatives (Boonstra & Boelens 2011; Salemink & Strijker 2016).

The above-mentioned six aspects related to the failure of citizens' initiatives are derived from studies on ongoing citizens' initiatives. It is unclear which role the aspects fulfil in the process of failure and whether this plays out differently for different types of initiatives in rural areas. There is little work focusing on the processes by which citizens' initiatives fail in different contexts and the consequences of such failures, even though a focus on failed citizens' initiatives would contribute to developing further insights into these types of initiatives and the prevention of failure (Meijer 2017). This knowledge gap may be explained by the fact that initiators of failed initiatives are more difficult to reach because of the potential stigmatization associated with stopped or failed citizens' initiatives (Meijer 2017). This paper aims to fill the gap around failed citizens' initiatives and to shed light on the processes involved with the stoppage and failure of citizens' initiatives from the perspective of the initiatives themselves.

5.3 Three case studies of citizens' initiatives

5.3.1 Research area and case selection

The analysis presented in the current study is based on qualitative data from three case studies. The initiatives are situated in the three northern provinces of the Netherlands: Drenthe, Friesland and Groningen. The initiatives take place in rural

areas that are experiencing or are expected to experience depopulation; thus, in these areas, the need for citizens' initiatives to contribute to public service delivery can be more urgent (Copus et al. 2011; Salemink 2016; Skerratt 2010; Steiner & Atterton 2014; Woods 2006). We focus specifically on rural areas, defined according to Dutch standards as having 1000 addresses or fewer per square kilometre (CBS n.d.). Some of the included areas can be considered less popular areas to live, and they attract lower levels of migration compared to more popular rural areas. Motivations to move to these areas include living close to family and friends, favourable housing prices and the physical quality of the environment (Bijker 2013).

Three citizens' initiatives that perceived their own performance as failed were studied. The initiatives were identified and selected based on an earlier inventory of citizens' initiatives (de Haan, Haartsen, et al. 2018; de Haan, Meier, et al. 2018a). To be selected for the study, the initiatives had to meet the criterion of no longer being active or of struggling, i.e., having failed according to their own perspective. Considering these initiatives as failed does not mean that the initiators had stopped trying to reach their goals or that others perceived the initiative as failed. An even distribution within the three provinces was allowed because different (policy) contexts could play a role in the failure of the initiatives. As much as possible, external professionals involved with the initiatives, such as government officials, were also approached about participation in the case studies. However, not all of them were willing to participate, generally because they had insufficient time to participate or because they had changed jobs in the meantime. The presented findings are thus mainly based on the perspectives of the initiators, but multiple perspectives were included. For all cases, the point of information saturation was reached.

A qualitative research approach was adopted because the aim of this study is not to merely identify failure factors. Rather, our focus is on gaining insights into the process of failure and the interplay among the failure factors that shape this process. Furthermore, identifying failed initiatives has proven to be complicated (Meijer 2017; de Haan, Haartsen, et al. 2018), making a qualitative approach most suitable for this study.

5.3.2 Description of the three cases

To understand a multitude of different initiatives, we chose to use three different cases of perceived failed initiatives that varied in their characteristics (in terms of location, goals, group composition, and relationship with government). *The first case* is a citizens' initiative that aimed to combine several facilities and services into one area in a village. The process started with one of the sports clubs, the soccer club, being in need of new changing rooms. Given the context of depopulation in the region and the village, a group of residents saw an opportunity and made plans to

combine several services and facilities within the village. The services and facilities were all already situated within the village, but they required renovation and would preferably be located in the same central location. The idea behind this combination of facilities was to reduce overall costs and thus maintain these services by sharing the building and related costs, and above all, to keep them affordable when member numbers start to decline.

The initiators were very ambitious in their plans and aimed to combine many services and facilities. The services and facilities were mostly connected to the sports associations in the village that needed to renovate their current accommodations, namely the soccer facilities, the swimming pool and the court tennis club. Additionally, the existing multifunctional accommodation was in need of a renovation and was included in the plans for the new building. The new building and surrounding fields would also accommodate the tennis club and snooker club and serve as a central canteen for all the associations. Additionally, cultural associations, such as music associations, were to be accommodated within the building. Lastly, the building would serve as a central meeting point for the village, and halls could be rented for computer courses for the elderly or for youth gatherings, for example. In the following, this case will be referred to as the *multifunctional accommodation initiative*.

The multifunctional accommodation initiative started to gather funding after the group and its ideas had taken shape. Initially the local government was approached for funding. The local government was positive about the plans but informed the initiators at an early stage that it would not be able to provide financial support. The group of initiators therefore approached the regional government, which was also positive about the plans. Nevertheless, because financial support for the initiative would include regional financial means, the regional government requested that a regional vision and approach be included within the plans. The initiators wanted to meet these additional requirements for a regional approach. One element of the requirement for the regional vision was the commitment of the surrounding villages because (financial) support for the services and facilities in the village where the initiative was situated would also mean the end of support and eventually the end of the services and facilities in the other villages, a result of depopulation and a lack of government funds to support all services. Therefore, a discussion began among inhabitants of the initiative's village and the surrounding villages regarding which services and facilities had to remain at which location and which villages would (in the longer term) lose certain services and facilities. Ultimately, the villages were not able to reach an agreement on the division of services and facilities, so the initiative did not secure a regional commitment from the surrounding villages. This lack of commitment resulted in the failure of the initiative because the regional government argued that they could not provide the financial support needed. During the data-collection process, this was the status quo: developed plans but a lack of financial and political support.

The second case involves the prevention of the demolition of social houses and the establishment of a housing cooperative. A social housing corporation communicated that 22 houses within a village were scheduled for demolition because of expected population decline and the poor condition of the houses. This announcement led to a protest by inhabitants of the village, especially on the street where the demolition was planned because the inhabitants were very dissatisfied with this decision. A town meeting was organised, during which the citizens' initiative was created. The citizens' initiative wanted to provide an alternative to safeguard affordable social housing for their village and to prevent open spaces from developing on their street. This initiative will be referred to as the *housing cooperative initiative*.

With the start of the housing cooperative initiative, negotiations began among the initiators, the housing corporation at the forefront and, further in the background, the local government. The interests of the different stakeholders were in opposition, with the initiative wanting to safeguard the houses and the corporation and local government wanting to demolish them because of their poor condition and the predicted decline in future residents, given the context of depopulation. The initiators developed several plans to prevent demolition, which went back and forth between the initiators and the corporation. One of the options was a housing cooperative. At first, the corporation and the local government did not support this plan because they did not want to place (more) houses of poor quality on the rental market and burden the cooperative with the costs of renovation. Furthermore, the existing housing quotas ('contingenten' in Dutch) prescribe demolition of deteriorated houses within areas that expect population decline. Nevertheless, the corporation later did see the possibilities of launching a social housing cooperative with a cooperative plan and became legally obligated to financially facilitate the start of that plan (because of new legislation: Woningwet 2018). Therefore, the housing corporation wanted to provide the opportunity for a pilot but set one condition for this pilot: it would only include the safeguarding of six houses instead of all 22 houses scheduled for demolition. These six houses were in the best condition compared to the others and thus required smaller investments in renovation.

In this process of negotiating and forming plans, the relationships between the initiators on the one side and the institutions on the other side deteriorated. There was a lack of trust between these stakeholders, and the initiators felt that they were being obstructed by the housing corporation because of the limited options for alternatives. Additionally, the corporation's communication with the initiators was experienced as negative, while at the same time, the corporation felt that they were sometimes kept in the dark.

The housing cooperative initiative stalled during the process of building the cooperative plan. The initiators did not trust the housing cooperative to be viable when it would only include six houses; they saw potential risks in the event of a default. However, the housing corporation and the local government were bound

by the housing quotas, which did not allow safeguarding more houses for the cooperative. Furthermore, the high level of distrust between the initiators and the housing corporation had increased, damaging the relationships and negotiations. At the time of the data collection, the initiators were considering what the best possible outcome could be for their neighbourhood and village.

The third case is a citizens' initiative focusing on sustainable energy and liveability, including several villages in one of the above-mentioned provinces. By starting an energy cooperative, a group of inhabitants of these villages wanted to create revenue that could be invested in improving the liveability of their villages. The energy cooperative was meant to generate sustainable energy with solar panel fields, for example, for its members within the region. This initiative will be referred to as the *energy cooperative initiative*.

The energy cooperative initiative started during a village meeting among citizens. A group of initiators was formed, and they involved people from other villages as well. Several ideas for sustainable energy were formulated in working groups, and one of the working groups focused on high-speed internet and split off from the initiative to work on that idea. With this split, many active members of the initiative continued by only contributing to the high-speed internet branch of the initiative because of the investment of time it required and because this branch of the initiative had already produced concrete results. The working groups on sustainable energy continued but struggled to attract the required funding, and at first their ideas existed only on paper.

As a result, it was difficult to attract members who wanted the energy cooperative to be their energy supplier, and to attract members for the initiative in itself. A vicious cycle developed in which people left the initiative instead of producing concrete ideas and results. Additionally, plans for wind turbines in one of the participating villages led to some inhabitants no longer wanting to contribute to a sustainable society in general or to the energy cooperative in particular. The decision about the placement of wind turbines led to so much conflict within the region that cooperation on sustainable energy was no longer possible among the residents. Therefore, the funds that had been secured in the meantime were returned. At the time of data collection, the initiative still existed, but in a hibernating state, awaiting potential new plans in the future because it was no longer active at that point.

Thus far, none of the cases have succeeded in their plans, yet there is still some activity within all of them. Despite still being slightly active, all initiatives are perceived as failed because, according to the respondents, their initiatives were not successful and they are unsure whether future success is possible. Nevertheless, the end-points of the cases are unclear because, within each one, opportunities for continuation in alternative forms are still being explored or there is a less active search for opportunities, and the door remains open for the future. Meier (2018)

also revealed that there is often no clear end-point for what she refers to as challenged initiatives.

5.3.3 Data collection and analysis

Fifteen in-depth interviews were conducted with participants of the citizens' initiatives and with the involved professionals during the period from February to September 2017 (see table 1 for the number of interviews per case). Using a semi-structured interview protocol, open questions were asked about the way the initiative evolved, which processes took place and how and why the initiators perceived the initiative as a failure. External professionals involved with the initiative were able to illustrate these processes from an institutional perspective. Nevertheless, the perceived failure was experienced by the initiators, not necessarily by the professionals.

Each interview covered the status of the initiative at the time of the interview, the opinion of the participant about who was responsible for the initiative and its failure and whether the failure could have been prevented. The interviews took one to two hours. Additionally, the websites of the cases and additional documents and information provided by the initiators, such as presentations and minutes of meetings, were used for the analysis.

Using the qualitative data analysis software package Atlas.ti, the transcribed interviews were coded and analysed. During the analysis, fragments of the interviews were coded; these fragments described the steps and achievements of the initiative, the causes of failure, the reflections of the participants on the process and the role of other participants and institutions. The most prominent code themes, which surfaced during the analysis, were related to the process of the initiative, the consequences of stopping, the motivation of the participants, the effects of the initiative within the village and the skills of the members of the initiative.

Before the interviews started, the participants were informed about how the information they provided would be used and, upon agreement, the participants signed to indicate their consent. To ensure as much disclosure as possible on potentially sensitive topics, the participants were ensured confidentiality and anonymity in the proceedings. Therefore, in the description of the cases and the results, markers of identity are removed, and pseudonyms are used to refer to the individual participants. The following results section will reveal which processes and factors contributed to the current situations of failure.

Table 1: Number of interviews per case

	Initiators	Professionals
Multifunctional accommodation initiative	4	3
Housing cooperative initiative	3	1
Energy cooperative initiative	4	0

5.4 Results

The data analysis revealed the processes that led to the perceived failure of the citizens' initiatives. Analysing failure as a process reveals not only individual factors that contribute to failure but also the relationships among these factors. With this process-based approach, the data reveal how some of the aspects identified in the literature review (not representing the community, volunteer burnout, scale, insufficient financial means, the relationship with government and existing and changing policy) indeed play a role in the process of perceived failure. Additionally, new obstacles within the failure process emerge from the analysis.

Based on the interview data, three themes surfaced related to the processes of perceived failure. The theoretical aspects can be placed within these three themes and will be discussed accordingly. The first theme, interactions with governments and institutions, refers to differences in pace between (government) institutions and the initiatives; these differences stem from differences in attitude, the timing of decision-making and the pace that is preferred. Within the theme of interactions with governments and institutions, the obstacles *relationship with government, existing and changing policy* and *insufficient financial means* are included. The second theme is appropriation, which includes senses of both ownership and responsibility. *The scale* and *non-representation of a community of citizens* are aspects from theory that are included within the appropriation theme because the cases aim to take ownership of local public space and do so with community support. The third theme is the personal investment initiators make regarding their own status and reputation. *Volunteer burnout* is also part of the third theme. The three themes will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

5.4.1 Interactions with governments and institutions

Within all three cases, interactions with the government and related (semi-governmental) institutions, such as the housing corporation for the housing cooperative initiative, played an important role in the process. The interactions were perceived as complicated and troubled. This perception can partly be explained by a difference in the pace and attitudes of official institutions and the initiative. The difference in pace and attitude was not necessarily dominated by not fitting into existing policy, as was expected from the literature (van Dam et al. 2015; Li et al. 2016). Where initiatives want to move as quickly as possible, governments and housing corporations are structured and limited by legislation and procedures,

even though the plans of the initiatives align with existing policy. Both governments and housing corporations are institutionalized and therefore limited in their scope of action; they cannot act and respond as freely as an individual could. However, the pace of government officials also differs because they are not responsible in the end for the outcomes of the initiative, roles differ and interests can be opposite of the interests of initiators (Beer 2014; Edelenbos et al. 2017). This pace and attitude mismatch surfaces within all three cases and is caused by the different structures and contexts in which initiatives and local governments operate. The quote below, from Lisa, illustrates such a mismatch for the housing cooperative initiative and shows how her initiative was not able to follow and decide on its own pace.

Lisa – initiator – housing cooperative initiative

‘[...] and then you start to think, you want to do things, but you want to organize things at your own pace. That should be possible, but when it is not, you just have to go on. [...] The pressure was high, the pressure of the housing corporation was high. [...] And that has been the biggest struggle for this initiative. Because of the pressure of the housing corporation, it never felt right, and that influences the entire initiative. You can’t decide your own tempo for your plans.’

Another difference in pace and attitude emerges in the multifunctional accommodation initiative. This initiative followed the instructions given by local and regional government, but the instructions and requests continued to increase and change. The initiators felt that the rules of the game were being changed while the game was being played. A similar trend can be observed within broadband initiatives, where new policies determining the course of action did not take into account initiatives that were already in process (Salemink & Strijker 2018). Jake, one of the initiators of the multifunctional accommodation case, illustrates in the following quote how they tried to follow the pace of the local and regional government by meeting those stakeholders’ requests. However, because the requests continued to change, the initiators were eventually no longer able to execute them, illustrating how the performative effect of policy described by van Dam et al. (2015) did not come into existence.

Jake – initiative leader – multifunctional accommodation initiative

‘It could have been prevented, but that is political. [...] You are lobbying, you are in the backrooms, and you have the feeling that everything will turn out okay. But then there comes another demand. At some point there was this demand, we had a go from the regional government official, who thought it was a great plan and we could work out the details and look in the surrounding areas, so we do that. We had to start [a new project] and that is where it went wrong.’

Not that it was wrong in itself, I think the idea was rather good. [...] It is just that they made it more and more difficult for us, or well, they kept on asking more of us, support of many people around us and the villages around us. We were, I think, too quick with our response. We should have focused on a single thing.'

The pace mismatch ultimately resulted in the multifunctional accommodation initiative not receiving political support and therefore not receiving the necessary financial support. Insufficient financial means thus play a role in the theme of interactions with government because these interactions have consequences for funding decisions by politics. A very similar process took place within the housing cooperative initiative, where the plans did not receive the needed support of the housing corporations and local government and the initiative therefore lost the ability to attract the necessary funding. The energy cooperative initiative did succeed in attaining initial funding, but because of interactions with the local and regional governments, who decided where to place the wind turbines and thus created conflict and resistance within the community, the funds were returned.

Furthermore, the data reveal that momentum is needed to achieve concrete results and attract people who want to contribute. To optimally use momentum, the initiators wanted to move quickly, a difference of pace compared to the government. In particular, the energy cooperative initiative struggled to maintain momentum. The split-off of one of the branches that was successful used its momentum and benefitted from it, but that had a negative effect on the momentum of the other branch of the energy cooperative initiative. In the following quote, Robert explains how the loss of momentum had a negative effect on the energy cooperative initiative.

Robert – initiator – energy cooperative initiative

'You start enthusiastically with something and you have many ideas. You think wow, we should do this together. And then it takes too long before you actually realize something, for whatever reason. We had eight board members and were pulling all kinds of strings, but still people drop out. There was no result. Show me something, before I decide whether I can contribute. It does not work when there is no enthusiastic group and it all comes down to a few individuals who have too little time.'

As noted earlier, the pace of local government can be slowed down because it is structured by formal procedures, and local governments have a certain response time to handle requests, such as for funding (Edelenbos et al. 2016; Edelenbos et al. 2017; Van Meerkerk et al. 2013). On the side of the initiatives, the pace is determined by the urgency of the goal and the motivations of the group of

initiators to create momentum. Pressing matters need to be addressed quickly, and achieving results will attract more people and set everything in motion. The initiatives and the local governments experience different workload peaks, and the peaks do not occur simultaneously. For instance, in the multifunctional accommodation case, the pace was determined by the need of the soccer club to renovate their changing rooms. This situation required a faster pace than the local and regional government – and the surrounding villages – could follow. Quentin, a local government official, stresses the importance of taking the time for these types of processes, which did not occur in the multifunctional accommodation case.

Quentin – local government official – multifunctional accommodation case

When people have to give in, villages have to give in, whether it is a school or whether it is sharing facilities, it is a painful process. The process is painful, but once the facilities are gone and are elsewhere with high quality and functioning well, then you forget about it quickly. You forget it. But that process, that is painful. And you should take your time for it. And I think, that that has been the mistake, we put too much responsibility on the shoulders of [the village].'

Quentin illustrates that different interests, structured by different paces and attitudes, resulted in the failure of the multifunctional accommodation case. He also highlights how the responsibility of structuring and matching these differences for a successful outcome is too much for initiators to bear. Moreover, the consequences of the mismatch of paces and attitudes are borne by the initiators on a personal level and by the inhabitants on a village level. A similar observation, where citizens bear the risks of initiatives not succeeding, was made in a study on rural broadband initiatives (Salemink & Strijker 2018). Ownership of risks and of the initiative itself relates to the second theme, appropriation of the citizens' initiative.

5.4.2 Appropriation

The matter of appropriation is an interesting subject. Appropriation is characterized by senses of ownership, responsibility for the citizens' initiative and social-spatial aspects. As stated in the previous section, the initiators and inhabitants of the involved villages bear the consequences of not succeeding, while at the same time, it seems that the process of the initiative is a shared responsibility among initiators and government. The following quote from Steven illustrates the interdependence between initiatives and local or regional government (an interdependence also found by Salemink & Strijker (2016)), and thus, how both feel a responsibility for the process.

Steven – initiator – energy cooperative initiative

*'There is a certain power, even when you do things right, they can still shut you down in a way.
[Interviewer: you mean the government?]*

The regional government. So, as a citizen it is difficult, you do need a few people who are on your side. [...] At different times you can see that, even when you think that you have everything in order, you are still subject to the randomness of the government [...] and there is a huge civil service bureaucracy opposite of you which is hard to compete with. You need very thick skin.'

Steven describes the complex dependency of the initiative on the government. Because of this dependency, it can be difficult to appropriate an initiative when both initiatives and governments have responsibilities and when there is a difference in power over the initiative. This dependence and the randomness of the government, as Steven refers to it, can be a barrier to the appropriation of an initiative.

When discussing the failure of the initiatives, the respondents all said they did not feel responsible for the failure because they had done everything in their power. Therefore, the initiators feel that they have fulfilled their part of the responsibility and are not responsible for the process failing. The quote from Lisa, below, describes how she does not feel responsible for the failure of the housing cooperative initiative.

Lisa – initiator – housing cooperative initiative

I think the only thing we could have done differently was doing less, stopping with all of it. And probably that would have saved us from much frustration too. On the other hand, I think that would not have done right by the desires of the village. Now, at least, and we know that as initiators, we have taken it thus far that we simply cannot get any further. [...]

[Interviewer: do you feel responsible for this result?]

No. No. No. No. There are mostly institutional obstacles. And if you look at the stakeholders and the different interests, I think the chances of succeeding are down to zero to ten percent. So anything positive following from this is a win.'

Within the theme of appropriation, social-spatial aspects also play a role in the sense of ownership of collectively owned places. Villagers want to do something for their residential environments; they want to improve them according to their needs and desires. Accordingly, they appropriate places on a local level. At the same time, local and regional governments have and make plans for residential

environments on a larger scale and appropriate place on a regional level. The following quote from Leo shows how the regional decision to place wind turbines in a certain location influenced the energy cooperative initiative at the local level. Angry feelings and feelings of incomprehension got in the way of the initiative because initiators and villagers could not decide on the use of (and thus could not appropriate) the collective space of their village, and therefore they no longer wanted to contribute to sustainability.

Leo – initiator – energy cooperative initiative

'You'd say there would be a follow-up. But the whole situation around those wind turbines shut everything down. I cannot show up at someone's doorstep and ask them to do something for me. [...] They just tell me that they no longer want to do anything.'

We also observed the role of social-spatial aspects of appropriation in the other two cases. For the multifunctional accommodation case and for the housing cooperative case, this was the main reason for their perceived failure: the initiatives were bounded by regional-level policy, making it impossible for them to take control of their residential environment at the local level.

Appropriation of place relates to representation by the citizens' initiatives. When the group of citizens who takes control over a place represents the interests of the community, the citizens' initiatives can be perceived as more legitimate. Not being representative of the interests of the community, and thus not having legitimacy, was identified within the literature as a potential obstacle to citizens' initiatives (Edelenbos et al. 2016; Tonkens & Verhoeven 2018). We observed that representation in these cases is less about having a representative group composition (i.e., a balanced representation of all community groups within the initiative) than it is about support for the initiative's goal and the goal being supported by the community (i.e., without groups opposing the goal). For example, the housing cooperative initiative merely comprised initiators whose houses were not on the list for demolition, thus not representing all groups within the community equally. However, representation revolves around the interests of the people living on the street and in the villages. The initiators represent their interest, and this interest is broadly supported within the community. Nevertheless, in this case, representation was not found to be of great importance in the process of perceived failure. This finding can be explained by the development phase that the cases had reached. It seems that the initiatives had progressed to such an extent that the matter of representing the community, as a means of gaining legitimacy, had already taken place. Therefore, the initiatives could continue with their activities but still became stalled on different issues.

The motivation of the initiators to deploy the initiative, and thus appropriate both place and the initiative, seemed to be inexhaustible in all the cases. Only when they felt there were no options left, and after many setbacks, did their motivation to continue decline. This is not surprising when we consider that the initiators began their actions on behalf of their own places. Jennifer exemplifies why she was – and still is – motivated to join the housing cooperative initiative.

Jennifer – initiator – housing cooperative initiative

I am prepared to continue. To what extent and for how long, I am not sure yet. I am perseverant and a very tough person. I don't give up easily. [...] I know this about myself and that is why I thought I was suitable for the job. Let me join. And I enjoy it too. And it is not only fun. But to stand up for people who can't do it themselves [...], as an outsider it is easier.'

Jennifer's perspective also explains why an initiative's end-points are unclear: new possibilities for making the residential environment more compatible with the initiators' needs and desires are always explored because of the motivation of the initiators and the interest they have in adapting 'their' place. At the same time, this interest explains why initiatives do not look beyond the local level of their plans, in contrast to governments that operate at the regional level and by doing so also complicate the initiative's interactions with governments.

5.4.3 Personal investment

People who are active within a citizens' initiative invest personal resources in the initiative (Healey 2011; Wiseman 2006; WRR 2012). The data reveal that first, the initiators invest a large amount of their time into the initiative; in some instances their involvement is comparable to a full-time job. Furthermore, the initiators invest in the initiative with their skills, knowledge and networks. In all cases, we observed that the levels of knowledge, networks and skills present was probably sufficient, and where it was lacking, external advice from a professional was used, indicating that success would be likely. Nonetheless, it seems that, especially for the multifunctional accommodation and housing cooperative cases, the initiators' lacked the skills necessary to play the political game. The political game is partly composed of the opposing interests of local and regional governments, where local governments are in need of active citizens. However, this need can lead to inequality and to the regional government aiming to prevent inequality among regions but therefore not being able to support local initiatives. The multifunctional accommodation and housing cooperative cases were not able to obtain political support for their plans and thus they could not obtain funding. Jake explains this role of politics in the following quote.

Jake – initiative leader – multifunctional accommodation initiative

'You need each other. [...] the initiative is at the provincial level, at municipal grounds, so local politics is included as well. And when that does not come to a higher level, policy wise, with the local and regional political colours, which differ... You need people who can unite that, you need those people a lot. We did not really have those people, I think. We had our networks and our relations, but politically speaking, we fell short. We really fell short. We tried our very best, and two really played their parts well, but politically we fell short.'

The investment of skills, knowledge and time can put a strain on initiators, ultimately leading to volunteer burnout. In the literature, volunteer burnout was described as a factor that can lead to the failure of citizens' initiatives (Allen & Mueller 2013; Saleminck & Strijker 2016). Remarkably, we found that, indeed, much was asked of the initiators in terms of skills, knowledge and time, but no signs of volunteer burnout were present. The opposite seemed to be true: even though the initiators made large personal investments into the initiative, their motivation did not decrease, as illustrated previously.

In addition to investing their skills, knowledge and time, the initiators also make a personal investment by affiliating themselves with the initiative. They represent a larger group, and by doing so, they invest their own reputation and status. The investment of reputation and status carries risks for the participants as well. When things go wrong, their reputation and status are damaged. Preventing this social damage could be another explanation for the unclear end-points of struggling initiatives. For the multifunctional accommodation initiative, this risk of social damage played an essential role and led to initiators saying that they no longer wanted to put their good reputation at risk because they needed to protect their professional careers. Jake, initiator of the multifunctional accommodation initiative, highlighted this during the interview.

Jake – initiative leader – multifunctional accommodation initiative

'We said to each other, we quit lobbying. It will cost us our credibility. Look, I am retired, my resume is completed. [...] But the others, they are still working on their resume. [...] Those people are daily at the local and regional governments, and we needed those networks. But their credibility would be ruined. So we said, we have to be sensible and this was it.'

The obstacles experienced by citizens' initiatives, related to pace, appropriation and personal investments, lead to the perceived failure of the cases and illustrate which processes take place in the perceived failure of citizens' initiatives. Following the conclusion in the final section below, the findings will be discussed.

5.5 Conclusion

Depopulation in rural areas has increased the interest in and relevance of citizens' initiatives as an alternative mode of service provision. The existing body of literature mainly focuses on successful citizens' initiatives, leaving the processes of failure under-researched (Meijer 2017). The current study aimed to answer the following research question: *How can the processes of failure of citizens' initiatives be described and explained?* In this paper, the processes that take place in citizens' initiatives that lead to their perceived failure have been explored using a case-study approach. The viewpoints of initiators and government officials regarding the process of failure were included in the analysis. Following the literature review, six obstacles were identified that may contribute to the failure of citizens' initiatives: not representing the community, volunteer burnout, scale, insufficient financial means, the relationship with government, and existing policy. Insights into how these and potential additional obstacles are interrelated have been provided, and the perspective adopted here sees failure as a process. Based on the case study data, three themes surfaced that illustrate the perceived process of failure: interactions with governments and institutions, appropriation and personal investment. Within these three themes, theoretical aspects and additional influences were described. It appeared that the 'interactions with governments and institutions' and the 'appropriation' themes have a particularly strong influence on the process of failure because these themes emerged most dominantly within all three cases. The 'personal investment' theme was also part of the failure process within all three cases, but to a somewhat smaller extent.

The 'interactions with governments and institutions' theme indicated how transferring responsibilities can lead to mismatches in several areas and thus contribute to perceived failure. The interactions between citizens' initiatives and governments appeared to be troubled because of policies, i.e., a government being constrained by policies or a citizens' initiative with plans that do not align with existing policies (Bisschops & Beunen 2018; Li et al. 2016; Nederhand et al. 2016). Differences in pace and attitude, loss of momentum and insufficient financial means are also part of the process, and all can lead to troubled interactions. In particular, the perceived failure of the multifunctional accommodation initiative was dominated by the processes that fall within this theme.

Within the 'appropriation' theme, the process of how initiators want to appropriate collectively owned places and take responsibility for an initiative was highlighted. Despite governments also being responsible to a certain extent, governments and initiators do not experience the initiative goals as a shared responsibility. Responsibilities overlap even though interests can be opposed to each other. This combination of overlap and opposition can result in the initiators not being able to appropriate the initiative and ultimately contributes to the perceived failure of the initiative. Barriers within the process of appropriation were identified as well, including the randomness and the non-transparency of the government.

The last theme, 'personal investment', illustrated the effort initiators put into their initiatives and how this relates to the process of failure. The initiators' identification with their place of residence is strong, and initiators are willing to make large investments in the initiative via their involvement and perseverance. One of the obstacles identified in the literature, volunteer burnout, seemed not to be an obstacle in our cases. The initiators invest much of their time, knowledge, networks and skills, but they do not seem to be overburdened. The obstacle that we do note is potential damage to the reputation of the initiators when things go wrong. This social damage can be related to the smaller scale and rural setting in which the initiatives operate, given the relatively close ties and higher levels of social control that exist in such settings. At the same time, the close ties could function as a safety net that prevents volunteer burnout, potentially explaining the lack of volunteer burnout in our cases. Nevertheless, the personal investment of initiators deserves recognition. After an initiative fails, the same initiators can decide to entirely quit their efforts for the community as well as for other initiatives (Salemink 2016). Citizens' initiatives can play a vital role in renewed service provision in depopulating rural areas, but their social role should be kept in mind at the same time, and opportunities to develop the initiative in the way the initiators intend should be provided.

Within all three themes, we see that the process of perceived failure is dominated by a discrepancy of scale. Citizens' initiatives are concrete projects that operate at the local scale. Local inhabitants feel responsible, and their private reputation in the village is involved. Initiatives need to be able to optimally use momentum to realize their goals, but this contrasts with how government institutions function. Governments operate at the regional scale and are less concrete in their policies, plans and regulations. Government officials are professionally involved, mostly in an advisory role. Governments operate at a different pace, which can result in a loss of momentum for citizens' initiatives and in this way contributes to the process of perceived failure.

The relationship between governments, citizens' initiatives and policies has been discussed throughout this study. Citizens' initiatives are often described as a potential alternative for the public provision of facilities and services (Brannan et al. 2006; Cheshire & Woods 2009; Healey 2015; Jones & Little 2000; Shucksmith et al. 2006; Thiede et al. 2017), and as such, as an alternative to existing policies. It should also be taken into account that citizens' initiatives, in their particular contexts, are an established fact for governments and institutions, functioning as an alternative to existing policies. As such, citizens' initiatives require adaptation from governments and institutions, instead of the other way around, i.e., by forcing citizens to align with existing policies. Governments should and can adopt a role of evolving towards facilitating these initiatives in the necessary ways. A one-size-fits-all approach departing from existing policy does not suit these unique initiatives, which require tailor-made and context-specific support. Expecting citizens' initiatives to conform to existing policies seems to be contradictory: serving as an

alternative to existing policy cannot entail simultaneously aligning with that same policy.

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Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

The underlying aim of this thesis has been to add to the knowledge base and to develop a deeper understanding of citizens' initiatives in depopulating rural areas in the Netherlands. Here, citizens' initiatives are defined as *formally or informally organised groups of citizens who are active and contribute to the public domain on a voluntary basis without financial compensation*. Briefly stated, they refer to citizens who voluntarily contribute to the public domain. The process of involving citizens' initiatives and their assumption of responsibilities relating to service delivery and liveability was found to be complex, entailing varying and, at times, opposing interests of the concerned stakeholders. The depopulated rural context constituted the research setting, given that alternative providers of services and facilities may be located at greater distances from rural communities, thus increasing the relevance of citizens' initiatives. In addition, societal changes such as ageing, shifting consumption demands, austerity measures and an expansion of scale can have a stronger impact on rural depopulating areas (Copus et al. 2011; Skerratt 2010; Steiner & Atterton 2014; Woods 2006).

The emphasis in this study was on the perspectives and experiences of various stakeholders such as initiators, local and regional government officials and other professionals. Accordingly, the study addressed the main research question, namely: *'How can citizens' initiatives be described and understood in terms of success, failure and continuity in its local context of depopulation in rural areas?'* In Chapter 2, professionals' perspectives on success were explored, while those of the initiators were examined in Chapter 3. A further line of inquiry focused on factors that influence the success and failure of citizens' initiatives. Apart from success, the continuity of citizens' initiatives, and how the concept of continuity can be understood, were explored in Chapter 4. Lastly, focus has been on the process of perceived failure in Chapter 5, from the perspectives of several stakeholders.

The next section (6.2) of this concluding chapter presents a summary of the main research findings in relation to the research questions presented in Chapter 1. Subsequently, in section 6.3, the wider implications of the findings are considered and discussed. Next, some concluding thoughts on the role of citizens' initiatives in depopulating rural areas are offered in section 6.4. In the final section (6.5), some policy implications that follow from the study's findings are presented.

6.2 Main findings

In Chapter 2, an attempt was made to answer the study's first research question: *How can the success and failure of citizens' initiatives be defined?* Professionals and local and regional government officials shared their visions on the concepts of success and failure of citizens' initiatives during focus group discussions. A three-level theoretical framework for understanding how stakeholders conceptualized success

was constructed based on a review of the literature. These three levels at which the effectiveness of citizens' initiatives was examined are the community, networks, and organization or participant level. Effectiveness at the community level relates to the output of an initiative and therefore its contribution to the community. At the network level, effectiveness is associated with the sustainability of a network, requiring the pre-establishment of inter-organizational relationships. Finally, at the Organisation or participant level, effectiveness refers to how participation within a citizens' initiative is expected to benefit the members. To be considered successful, citizens' initiatives should demonstrate effectiveness at each of these three levels.

The perspectives of the professionals revealed a somewhat paternalistic view regarding successful citizens' initiatives. Remarkably, an emphasis on the achievement of project goals, which is related to output and effectiveness at the community level, was not emphasized in this perspective. Rather, an initiative was perceived as successful as long as citizens remained continuously active and in charge. Evidently, professionals focus mostly on the process of citizens' initiatives and consequently on the organization or participant level of effectiveness. This finding seems remarkable because of the expectations surrounding citizens' initiatives related to the 'participation society', such as providing services in areas where their provision or continuity is lacking. However, these results did not support a focus on success in terms of effectiveness at the community level, that is, goal achievement and thus service provision and maintenance. Moreover, from the standpoint of the initiators a differing view was expected, namely placing more focus and value on goal achievement.

This thesis has also shed light on the perspectives of initiators. Thus, in Chapter 3, RQ 1 as well as RQ 2 (*which factors contribute to success and failure of citizens' initiatives?*) were addressed from the perspective of initiators. To answer both questions, a questionnaire was administered among citizens' initiatives. In total, 157 completed questionnaires were returned (a response rate of 26.8%). A principal component analysis conducted on the questionnaire data revealed that the initiators define the success of citizens' initiatives at all three levels: the community, network, and organization levels. An in-depth examination revealed that goal achievement was perceived as an important aspect of success; hence, success was related to community-level effectiveness. In general, the initiators indicated that achieving goals was an important dimension of successful citizens' initiatives, particularly with regard to their own initiatives. It should be noted that goals are not fixed entities; they can shift and change over time within one initiative. Thus, not achieving an initial goal could still result in a successful outcome for the initiative in the longer term.

In Chapter 3, the factors perceived by initiators as contributing to the success and failure of their initiatives were identified. A review of the literature revealed that previous studies have focused primarily on success factors and have identified the following four categories of success factors: the characteristics of the initiative,

functional success, social relations and inputs. The questionnaire allowed for the inclusion of a fifth category in which the initiators could provide other factors that had not previously been identified in the literature, but that they had experienced as influencing the success of their initiatives. The results of the regression analysis conducted on the questionnaire data indicated that the initiators experienced success and failure factors belonging to all four of the categories, with the exception of social relations. Success is influenced by an initiative's characteristics, such as group size, the developmental phase and communication levels and inputs, that is, their relationships with governments, such as involvement for funding. The suggestions of the respondents revealed two failure factors: lack of funds and disappointing interactions with governments. From the standpoint of functional success, the most important factor influencing success was the extent to which goals had been achieved to date. This indicates the strong dependence of success on goal achievement, as perceived by the initiators.

A further question addressed in Chapter 4 was that of the continuity of citizens' initiatives, that is, *factors influencing the continuity of citizens' initiatives*. Continuity can be examined at three different levels: the participant, group and initiative levels. At the participant level, continuity refers to the continuous involvement of individual members of the initiative. A group of initiators can also be characterized as continuous if the group remains stable and none of its members withdraws their participation. This is referred to as group-level continuity. Continuity at the initiative level refers to continuity at a higher level than the continuity of the individual members or of the entire group of initiators. An initiative can be considered continuous when it exists over time, irrespective of possible changes within the group's composition, until the time that the goal is achieved. This type of continuity extends to the maintenance that is associated with certain goals, such as managing personnel and the upkeep of a store relating to the goal of establishing a supermarket.

The conclusion that emerged from an analysis of the data derived from the questionnaires was that the most prominent level of continuity occurred at the level of the initiative, that is, continuity until the goal of the initiative is achieved. Once goals are achieved, initiatives are perceived as being more successful and more likely to continue. Furthermore, the expectation that success is a condition for continuity was not supported by the findings because the level of success was not one of the factors influencing continuity. The findings illustrate that continuity is not strongly dependent on the dropping-out of individual initiators or of the entire group of initiators. Given the assumption of the fragility of citizens' initiatives, considered as an alternative in service provision within the 'participation society', this finding appears promising.

Finally, a response to RQ 4 on *processes that contribute to the failure of citizens' initiatives* was provided in Chapter 5. Rather than focusing on separate failure factors, an integral approach was adopted in which failure was considered as a process

comprising an interplay of several factors. A review of the literature led to the identification of six potential obstacles encountered by citizens' initiatives: not representing the community, volunteer burnout, scale issues, insufficient financial means, the relationship with the government and existing and changing policies. Three case studies of 'failed' citizens' initiatives were conducted that included the perspectives of the initiators of the failed initiatives as well as professionals involved with these initiatives wherever possible. Three themes emerged from an analysis of the failure processes within these cases: (1) interactions with governments and institutions, (2) appropriation and (3) personal investments. The analysis revealed that in relation to the first theme, shifting responsibilities lead to several types of mismatches regarding issues such as pace and momentum, contributing to perceptions of failure. Findings relating to the second theme of appropriation indicated that initiators were not always able to appropriate their initiative because, although responsibilities are shared with governments, the interests of both parties could be opposed. The findings relating to the final theme of personal investment illustrated the areas in which initiators invested efforts in their initiatives. Despite the fact that personal investments were often considerable, volunteer burnout did not emerge as an issue in these case studies. The downsides of personal investment, such as reputational damage or complete cessation of community participation, were also identified in this chapter and an argument was presented for minimizing the risk of social damage. A predominant aspect of the process of failure appeared to be the scale discrepancy, with citizens' initiatives operating at the local level but interacting with governments and institutions operating at higher levels.

6.3 Citizens' initiatives in the participation society

6.3.1 Perspectives on success, failure and continuity

Existing studies on citizens' initiatives have rarely attempted to conceptualize success and failure. By contrast, both of these terms were explored and analysed from different perspectives (i.e., by professionals, local/regional government officials and initiators) in this study. Chapters 2 and 3 demonstrated that success and failure are nuanced rather than clear-cut concepts, evidencing unclear boundaries and entailing significant differences in perspectives. However, a finding of this study was that professionals demonstrated a somewhat paternalistic view of the success of citizens' initiatives. Whereas it had been assumed that initiators would strongly contest this view, in fact, they also valued learning opportunities generated by the process while simultaneously including aspects of other levels of success in their conceptualization. Goal achievement was influential in initiators' conceptualization of success in general and especially in relation to their own initiatives.

The significance of goal achievement was highlighted further as it was foregrounded in relation to continuity. Once initiatives create results or their goals are achieved, they are perceived by initiators as being successful and likely to continue. This finding is related to the momentum of citizens' initiatives. Initiatives must maintain their momentum to be successful. This can be accomplished by reaching the goals of the initiative or other relevant results, for example, the acquisition of sufficient funds. However, it should be borne in mind that different types of continuity exist at the levels of the participant, the group or the initiative as a whole. Moreover, some initiatives, such as a children's playground that does not require maintenance, do not need to be continued once their goal has been achieved. Therefore, continuity entails different levels of importance for different types of initiatives. In the context of service delivery, it is also necessary to examine which type of initiative, and accordingly which level of continuity, fits with the service or issue being addressed.

Two functions of citizens' initiatives were identified based on the findings of the study: achieving goals (the initiators' perspective) and the creation of social cohesion (the professionals' perspective). These different perspectives on successful citizens' initiatives have been demonstrated throughout this thesis. The different perspectives on the importance of goal achievement, imply that the perspectives on the function citizens' initiatives should serve, differ as well. These differing expectations can lead to a troublesome relationship between initiators and professionals (such as governments) because these groups work to achieve different outcomes, and their divergent perspectives can constitute an obstacle constraining the momentum of an initiative. The alignment of the expectations of initiators and professionals regarding citizens' initiatives could contribute to improving their relationship. However, citizens' initiatives are an established fact in the sense that they do not follow guidelines or policies but come into existence out of perceived necessity. Therefore, it should be professionals, including governments, who align their expectations with those of the initiators and not the other way around. This would require adaptation and efforts on the part of governments, institutions and professionals towards understanding what the initiatives are about, which will be described in more detail in section 6.5 on policy implications.

6.3.2 Democracy and accessibility

Within welfare states, the task of distributing scarce goods within a specific area to ensure that access to these goods is as equitable as possible has traditionally fallen to governments. In the current timeframe of the 'participation society', governments are handing over part of these tasks to citizens. However, whereas citizens do not have an election-based mandate for distributing scarce goods, they are nevertheless invited to take responsibility for service provision within their

living environments, or they assume this responsibility themselves. Service provision that is conducted in this manner can become a club good, such that only members of the initiative, or those who belong to the community, potentially benefit from their membership. Consequently, inequalities in access to services may be strengthened, which can impact an entire community (Warner 2011). This shift also has implications for democratic practices and for the accessibility of services. Because these services are not primarily distributed by governments, they are not, by default, equally accessible.

A number of researchers have argued that the participation society leads to changes in responsibilities and in service provision, requiring new roles for both governments and citizens, which are not always in effect (Meijer 2018; Meijer 2016). Furthermore, interdependencies among governments and citizens continue to exist because the initiatives (partially) make use of governmental resources while remaining accountable and compliant with policies. This interdependency necessitates the existence of a sound relationship between citizens' initiatives and governments. However, as this thesis has demonstrated, this relationship can be troubled at times. The study's findings indicate that struggles do not merely follow from rules and regulations, which are often presented as obstacles for citizens' initiatives within the literature (Bosworth et al. 2015; Curry 2012; Salemink & Strijker 2016). In addition, there appear to be two other obstacles that are constitutive of this troubled relationship: bureaucratic processes and the issue of scale. Firstly, whereas citizens' initiatives should be pursued at their own pace, bureaucratic processes, such as reaching a decision on funding applications or the reaction terms of a government, can be impediments. Secondly, citizens are often engaged at a different (lower) scale than that of politics, given that their primary focus and locus of operation is the local level. However, government officials are required to tackle issues at the regional level, which is a higher scale than that which concerns the initiators. In such cases, although their interest is in operating at local levels, citizens' initiatives are expected, and at times forced, to conform to regional-level policies.

The struggles between governments and citizens' initiatives, however, can also be understood as more deeply rooted. Governments aim to ensure the equitable distribution of and access to facilities and services as far as possible. Consequently, in most cases, they treat citizens' initiatives equally, applying a one-size-fits-all policy (van den Broek et al. 2016; Salemink 2016). However, citizens' initiatives assume different forms based on their goals (replacing an existing service or facility or introducing a new one) and their required continuity (maintenance of goals at the level of the initiative, or not). Thus, each initiative has its own specific needs in terms of governmental support (de Wilde et al. 2014). Consequently, a one-size-fits-all approach can stand in the way of the success of initiatives. Moreover, citizens' initiatives do not occur in all regions (Skerratt 2010; Skerratt & Steiner 2013). Both of these issues can unintentionally contribute to unequal access to services for citizens. Tailor-made approaches for the support of citizens' initiatives

are necessary for initiatives to fulfil a role in service provision. In addition, because self-organizing democracy (Edelenbos et al. 2017) is not fully in place, governments could function as a safeguard in areas where service provision is not taken up through citizens' initiatives.

6.3.3 Personal investments

The topic of citizens' investments for achieving fruitful initiatives has recurred throughout this thesis. Citizens invest their time, skills, networks and reputations in their initiatives to contribute to and participate in them. Accordingly, citizens' initiatives meet the requirements of the 'participation society' by actively contributing to their living environments. At the same time, as many studies have shown, citizens are empowered as they have a greater say over their living environments and use their so-called 'right to challenge' when they feel that they are better able to provide a service than a government institution (Espejo & Bendek 2011; Jones & Ormston 2014; Steiner & Farmer 2017; Verhoeven & Tonkens 2013). In light of these active contributions on the part of citizens, the issue that arises concerns the level of investment that can be expected from citizens for achieving successful citizens' initiatives.

Initiators are personally willing to invest in their initiatives. However, when initiatives (have to) fulfil policy-related criteria at the regional level, more is demanded of the initiators in terms of qualities, skills, time and engagement with complexity. Initiators cannot necessarily be expected to operate in the context of regional-level policies, as their initiatives are intended to function at the local level.

The findings of this thesis indicate that increasing demands in terms of time and complexity do not seem to pose an obstacle for initiators. The participants are willing to invest time, and in cases where knowledge or skills are lacking within the initiative, they are able to attract these from outside the initiatives by hiring professionals or obtaining advice. Therefore, volunteer burnout, an obstacle that has been frequently mentioned in the literature (Allen & Mueller 2013; Salemink 2016), did not apply to the case studies analysed in this thesis. However, another risk was identified that has not received attention within the literature so far: social damage.

Social damage occurs when initiatives struggle or fail. As the representatives of the initiative, those who participate in it are the first individuals to be criticized when it fails. The reputations and status of the initiators who invest their efforts in the initiative are thus potentially at risk. Therefore, a reduction in the risk of social damage is required. Whereas the reputations of initiators are important for maintaining their village ties and for preserving their social networks, which can be close-knit within rural communities, they can also be placed at risk in terms of these individuals' professional careers. An individual's participation within a

citizens' initiatives strengthens their *curriculum vitae*. Therefore, an individual's participation in a citizens' initiative entails an aspect that relates to their social and professional networks and that can potentially lead to social damage in the event of the initiative's failure. This can be a reason for initiators to withdraw their participation in an initiative. It can also constrain initiators who are considering joining a citizens' initiative when they have witnessed failure within the community, or if they were previously part of a failed citizens' initiative.

6.4 Conclusion

Governments, professionals and initiators have different perspectives on the functions of citizens' initiatives. These divergent opinions pose an obstacle for the functioning of citizens' initiatives because the concerned stakeholders differ in their focus and views on prospective outcomes. To bring about the necessary role changes associated with a shift towards the 'participation society', it seems that rural citizens' initiatives in depopulating areas have to fit within the daily practices of institutions. However, it should be the other way around. Citizens' initiatives are an established fact that require a response from professionals and governments. Therefore, citizens' initiatives should not be required to fit within the daily practices of institutions; rather, it is up to the institutions to improve their adaptive capacity in relation to citizens' initiatives in order to include them in their daily practices and policies.

When the concept of the 'participation society' was first discussed in the Netherlands, the idea behind citizens' initiatives was to maintain and enhance liveability. However, studies have shown that the liveability of rural communities is not primarily about the presence of public services or about the activity of participation in itself (Gieling 2018). Social relations are an important aspect of liveability (ibid.). This study supports the perspectives of professionals, which focus more on the process and positive side effects, such as social learning and enhancing networks, and less on goal achievement. However, this perspective is not necessarily aligned with local needs, as citizens' initiatives respond to local needs by addressing topics that are perceived as urgent or relevant by communities that support them (Bock 2016; Boonstra & Boelens 2011; Healey 2015). Therefore, local and regional governments should attend to the functions and goals of citizens' initiatives, which are important for the initiators and the community.

Besides the social function of citizens' initiatives and the function of delivering the service in itself, another function can be thought of as well: serving as a transition towards other forms of service delivery. This transitional status allows for experimentation with different forms of service delivery, such as citizens' initiatives. Over time, it is possible that other service delivery models may be discovered that are more suitable or that the services disappear entirely. This function seems to apply specifically to depopulating rural areas because of the urgency of

depopulation, which can be a trigger for the launch of citizens' initiatives in a way that does not occur in metropolitan areas. When citizens' initiatives are considered as a means for transition, their continuity is of less importance as they may be seen as temporary activities, until a definitive mode of service delivery is established. However, this temporality did not feature in the perspective of the initiators. The question then remains as to which function of citizens' initiatives is worthwhile for citizens, given that initiators prioritize goal achievement, which is not suited to the functions of enhancing social relations or serving as a transition.

In conclusion, citizens' initiatives require professionals to understand the functions they intend to fulfill. When considering citizens' initiatives as a long-term solution for service provision, it is important to be cognizant of the fact that there will be areas in which no initiatives will take place (Salemink & Strijker, 2018; Skerratt & Steiner, 2013). Therefore, reliance on citizens' initiatives for service provision may lead to further inequality. However, avoidance of this inequality through top-down service provision is incompatible with the 'participation society' and, consequently, with citizens' initiatives in their current form.

6.5 Policy implications

The shift towards the 'participation society' has resulted in a new situation for professionals and government institutions: citizens' initiatives are emerging in depopulating rural areas, where they strive to achieve their own goals and where they are increasingly claiming a share of governments' budgets. Governments and professionals need to respond accordingly. This response can entail policy adaptation, shifts in power relations and potential clashes of interests when there are differences in the priorities of citizens and those of local or regional governments. Government officials can become superfluous when the services and facilities for which they were formerly responsible are provided through citizens' initiatives. In light of the above conclusion, the following five recommendations for policy related to perspectives on and the functions of citizens' initiatives, are offered: developing a better understanding of the function of citizens' initiatives, providing a safety net function, communication of limitations and boundaries, minimalizing social damage and a consideration of scale differences. Below, these five recommendations are discussed in more detail.

6.5.1 Developing a better understanding the function of citizens' initiatives

This thesis has demonstrated that the functions of citizens' initiatives are understood differently by governments and by initiators. An understanding of the functions of citizens' initiatives on the part of governments and professionals that is aligned with that of the initiators would facilitate the initiatives. In this case, all of the concerned stakeholders would likely support and share the same goal.

However, this may be difficult to achieve in practice. Interests can be opposed, following from, for example, differences in spatial scales at which initiatives (local) and governments (regional or national) operate. Moreover, members' interests within an initiative can differ or clash; for example, apart from achieving the goal, some members may hope to create new jobs or income sources. An illustration of how interests can be opposed is when the idea of initiatives serving as a transition can be more appealing for local and regional governments than for initiators. Serious consideration of the objectives of citizens' initiatives from the initiators' perspectives by local and regional governments, which evidently occurred in some successful examples, marks a first step in the right direction. This perspective entails a focus on goal achievement and, to a lesser extent, on the positive side effects of citizens' initiatives. Moreover, when governments follow the pace of citizens' initiatives, a loss of momentum is avoided and the chances of a successful outcome increase.

6.5.2 Provide a safety net function

The previous recommendation can contribute to greater clarity on the role that these initiatives can play in service provision and enhanced liveability. However, this does not mean that citizens' initiatives are automatically generated in the places where local and regional governments desire their presence. Moreover, there may be areas remaining where citizens' initiatives have not occurred at all, leading to inequality among regions. In this case, governments can adopt a safety net function by providing services in these so-called white areas or not-spots (Salemink & Strijker 2018; Skerratt 2010) to ensure that access to services is as equitable as possible.

6.5.3 Communication of limitations and boundaries

Communication of limitations and boundaries relating to legislation or policy at an early stage of the initiative will provide insights into the viability of initiatives. Such insights can help to prevent disappointment among initiators and investments in an initiative that will be unable to operate as planned. However, this communication process is complicated by the fact that in most cases, governments formulate reactive policies following the commencement of initiatives. A tailor-made response to initiatives can facilitate communication of limitations and boundaries, enabling governments to respond more effectively to an individual initiative according to its type, scale and context. This process also relates to following the pace of initiatives. When governments respond to the needs of an initiative (instead of the other way around) and indicate obstacles at an early stage, initiatives are potentially better able to maintain their momentum. Moreover, the feeling among the initiators that the 'rules change while the game is being played' does not arise.

6.5.4 Minimalizing social damage

Greater awareness of the potential social damage resulting from the failure of an initiative can also be beneficial for citizens' initiatives. Social damage can result in the complete cessation of initiators' participation, including their participation in other initiatives. As such, it can have a deterrent effect on several citizens' initiatives. Governments can play a role in preventing social damage by creating awareness regarding the social roles of citizens' initiatives. A focus not only on preventing volunteer burnout but also on minimalizing social damage contributes to the sustained presence of active citizens who want to contribute to the 'participation society'.

6.5.5 Consideration of scale differences

A final recommendation relates to consideration of the scale at which citizens' initiatives operate, which can also be beneficial for such initiatives. Local-level operations appear to fit best with citizens' initiatives within the 'participation society'. Citizens' initiatives can provide better oversight at the local level because this is the level of the initiators' daily experience of their living environment. Operating at the regional level appears to create complications for initiatives, both in terms of relevant policies and regulations as well as in terms of the entailed expansion of scale that extends beyond the scope of the initiators. Cultivating greater awareness of the risks faced by regional-level initiatives and promoting initiatives at the local level can increase the likelihood that they will achieve their goals.

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Appendix I - Focus Group Discussion Protocol

Opzet:

Moderator en filmer

Materialen:

Laptop/computer, beamer, projectiescherm, powerpoint op usb/mail, flip-over, naambordjes, papier, schrijfmateriaal (pennen en stiften), definitie burgerinitiatieven op papier (1 per deelnemer), deelnemerslijst, protocol op papier.

Discussie handleiding:

Introductie

Iedereen hartelijk bedankt voor de aanwezigheid, ik ben blij dat jullie hier zijn. Mijn naam is Erzsi de Haan en zoals de meesten van jullie weten ben ik promovendus aan de Hanzehogeschool. Mijn onderzoek gaat over burgerinitiatieven in krimpgebieden, en daar gaan we het vandaag in deze focusgroep over hebben. Ook heb ik ... meegenomen om opnames te maken.

Eerst wil ik nog wat meer vertellen over dit promotieonderzoek. De komende drie en een half jaar ga ik mij bezig houden met welke factoren het al dan niet slagen van langer lopende burgerinitiatieven beïnvloeden, hierbij gaat het om burgerinitiatieven die zich richten op de leefomgeving, hierbij valt te denken aan het in stand houden van voorzieningen en het verzorgen van groen.

De focusgroep van vandaag is een eerste stap in het onderzoek. Doel is om tot een definiëring van succes en falen te komen. Verder ben ik aan het inventariseren welke initiatieven er op dit moment zijn in de drie noordelijke provincies.

Vervolgens ga ik een aantal initiatieven benaderen om deel te nemen aan een case study. Hierin zal ik onderzoeken welke processen gaande zijn en welke factoren een rol spelen in het succes van initiatieven.

De focusgroep van vandaag zal dus ook gaan over burgerinitiatieven. Er is veel informatie te vinden over burgerinitiatieven. Hierin wordt echter niet gesproken over wanneer een initiatief al dan niet succesvol is. Aan deze ruime begrippen wil ik met jullie invulling geven vandaag. De discussie zal zich dus richten op wat succes van burgerinitiatieven inhoudt en niet zozeer op wat burgerinitiatieven precies inhouden.

Voordat we beginnen wil ik nogmaals benadrukken dat deelname vrijwillig is. Om ervoor te zorgen dat ik wat vandaag besproken is goed kan documenteren en analyseren zullen er video- en audio opnames worden gemaakt. Ik wil benadrukken dat wat vandaag besproken en gefilmd wordt vertrouwelijk zal worden behandeld en alleen gebruikt wordt voor dit onderzoeksproject. In verslagen en publicaties van mijn onderzoek zullen gedane uitspraken nooit herleid kunnen worden naar

deze dag en uw persoon. Alle informatie wordt geanonimiseerd en alleen bij mij is bekend wie welke uitspraken heeft gedaan.

Tot slot wil ik nog iets vertellen over hoe we straks te werk zullen gaan. Na een korte voorstelronde en het definiëren van het begrip burgerinitiatieven zullen we ingaan op het thema: hoe definieer je succes en falen van burgerinitiatieven. Wat verstaan we onder een succesvol burgerinitiatief, wanneer is het een succes en wanneer niet.

Hierbij wil ik in drie rondes te werk gaan. In de eerste ronde kan iedereen kort een aantal aspecten benoemen waarvan je vindt dat die succes of falen bepalen. Dit doen we zonder hier verder dieper op in te gaan.

In de tweede ronde bekijken we de lijst die naar voren is gekomen in de eerste ronde en gaan we hierover in discussie: is iedereen het eens, is het een belangrijker dan het ander? In deze ronde komen we tot een preciezere afbakening van succes en falen en kunnen we onze meningen van ronde 1 daar waar nodig aanpassen of aanscherpen.

In de laatste ronde bekijken we het resultaat van de eerste twee rondes en kijken we of we nog iets missen.

Ik wil iedereen vragen aan de discussie deel te nemen en zijn of haar mening te delen. Hierbij wil ik benadrukken dat er geen goede of foute antwoorden zijn. Ik ben juist benieuwd naar ieder zijn persoonlijke mening. Omdat vandaag het perspectief van de professionals centraal staat, wil ik iedereen vragen jullie mening te geven vanuit jullie eigen beroepsperspectief.

Zijn er tot zover vragen?

Mocht er gaandeweg iets onduidelijk zijn dan kunt u dit altijd vragen.

Opening/Introductie

Dan wil ik nu beginnen met een korte voorstelronde. Iedereen heeft een naambordje gekregen maar ik zou graag even een ronde maken waarin iedereen zichzelf voorstelt en kort vertelt wat u doet in het dagelijks leven en hoe u te maken heeft met burgerinitiatieven.

Overgang

Nu we weten met wie we hier zijn vandaag wil ik graag beginnen met de inhoudelijke discussie.

Zoals gezegd, gaan we het vandaag over burgerinitiatieven hebben. Er zijn veel verschillende definities en invullingen van burgerinitiatieven te vinden. Voordat we ingaan op succes en falen, is het van belang dat we het met elkaar eens zijn over wat een burgerinitiatief inhoudt.

In het onderzoek hanteer ik de volgende definitie van burgerinitiatieven: (zichtbaar op sheet)

Burgerinitiatieven zijn formeel of informeel georganiseerde groepen van burgers die actie ondernemen die bijdragen aan het publieke domein. Burgerinitiatieven verschillen van sociaal ondernemers. (Sociaal ondernemer verdient aan de activiteiten)

Deze definitie staat ook op het papier dat jullie hebben gekregen.
Om deze definitie nog wat duidelijk te maken zal ik nog een voorbeeld laten zien.
Voorbeeld op sheet:
MFC met zowel maatschappelijke als commerciële voorzieningen: zwembad, restaurant, fitness, recreatiepark etc.

Er zijn natuurlijk meer definities van burgerinitiatieven, maar ik wil deze graag gebruiken zodat we het over hetzelfde hebben en lijn kunnen houden in de discussie. Ik wil in de discussie graag ingaan op wat succes en falen inhoudt en niet zozeer op wat nu wel of geen burgerinitiatief is.
Met dit in het achterhoofd: Kan iedereen zich aan deze definitie houden?

Kent iedereen een vergelijkbaar initiatief? Heeft iedereen een initiatief in het hoofd?

Kern

Om met de deur in huis te vallen: Wanneer vinden jullie een burgerinitiatief een succes en wanneer niet?

Ronde 1: twee keer een ronde, een keer succes, een keer falen: wanneer vind jij een burgerinitiatief een succes/geen succes? (iedereen bij langs en een aspect laten noemen, zonder verdere toelichting)

Ronde 2: bekijk de lijst die we hebben (succes/falen apart), toelichting? Wat betekenen deze aspecten? is iemand het ergens niet mee eens? Aanvullingen? Vragen? Aanpassingen? Rangorde in deze factoren? (discussie op gang laten komen)

Ronde 3: wat is resultaat? Conclusies? Compleet? Iets over het hoofd gezien? (discussie op gang laten komen)

Wie is het met dit standpunt eens/oneens?

Wie heeft nog aanvullingen?

Lijst factoren bij langs: wat ontbreekt er, hoe denkt iedereen hierover?

Thema's / besproken aspecten op sheet laten zien

Ingaan op aspecten, rangorde en samenhang.

Afsluiting

Einde van de discussie

Vragen/opmerkingen?

Dank voor deelname en input

Appendix II – Questionnaire

Beste lezer,

Hartelijk welkom bij de vragenlijst over bewonersinitiatieven in krimpgebieden. Uw deelname wordt bijzonder op prijs gesteld! Door op 'volgende' te klikken beginnen de vragen.

De vragenlijst begint met een aantal vragen over de kenmerken van het initiatief. Daarna volgt een aantal vragen over de redenen waarom u actief bent binnen het initiatief, en over de kenmerken van uw mede-initiatiefnemers. De vragenlijst sluit af met een paar algemene vragen over andere initiatieven.

Bent u actief (geweest) in meerdere initiatieven? Het kan gaan om initiatieven die op dit moment nog lopen maar ook om initiatieven die niet meer bestaan of afgerond zijn.

Ja

☐

Nee

☐

In welke initiatieven bent u actief (geweest)?

Wilt u voor het verder invullen van de vragenlijst één van de initiatieven in het hoofd nemen en gebruiken voor het beantwoorden van de vragen? Dit mag ook een initiatief zijn dat inmiddels niet meer actief is.

Kunt u aangeven welk initiatief u gebruikt voor het beantwoorden van de vragen?

Is uw initiatief op dit moment actief?

Ja

☐

Nee

☐

In welke plaats is het initiatief gevestigd?

Wanneer is het initiatief gestart?

In welke van de volgende ontwikkelingsfases van bewonersinitiatieven zou u het initiatief indelen?

- ☐ Opstartfase: inventarisatie van steun uit gemeenschap en bewoners die zich in willen zetten. Eerste aanzet.
- ☐ Inventarisatiefase: inventariseren van behoeften van gemeenschap, dialoog, inbedding van relevantie van het initiatief
- ☐ Groepsvorming: verzameling van mensen die zich in willen zetten voor hetzelfde doel
- ☐ Opkomst van een organisatie: formalisering van activiteiten en rechtsvorm
- ☐ Het initiatief loopt

Wat is de organisatievorm van het initiatief?

- ☐ Vereniging
- ☐ Stichting
- ☐ Eenmanszaak/VOF/BV
- ☐ Coöperatie
- ☐ Geen rechtspersoon

Anders, namelijk:

Wie nam het voortouw om het initiatief op te starten?

- ☐ Een (groep) buurt/dorpsgenoot(en)
- ☐ Een (groep) vriend(en) of kennis(sen)
- ☐ Ikzelf
- ☐ Een bestaande vereniging
- ☐ Gemeente
- ☐ Een maatschappelijke organisatie (bijv. een woningcorporatie)
- ☐ Provincie

Anders, namelijk:

Wat zijn de doelen van het initiatief?

In welke mate zijn de doelen behaald?

1 - helemaal niet	2	3	4	5 - helemaal wel
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Eventuele toelichting:

Hoeveel personen zijn betrokken bij dit initiatief? Het gaat hier om de mede-initiatiefnemers, bestuursleden, de personen die zich bezig houden met de organisatie van het initiatief en op regelmatige basis zich actief bezig houden met het initiatief.

☐ _ _ _ _ _

Kenden u en uw mede-initiatiefnemers elkaar voordat u met het initiatief begon?

- ☐ Ja
- ☐ Sommigen wel maar anderen niet
- ☐ Nee
- ☐ Geen sprake van mede-initiatiefnemers

Zijn er professionals betrokken bij het initiatief (het gaat hier om ondersteunende krachten die worden betaald voor hun bijdrage aan het initiatief)?

- ☐ Ja
- ☐ Nee

Hoeveel professionals zijn betrokken bij het initiatief?

☐ _ _ _ _ _

Wat voor type professional is betrokken bij het initiatief?

- ☐ Vanuit de overheid
- ☐ Vanuit een maatschappelijke organisatie
- ☐ Zelfstandige

Anders, namelijk:

Hoe vaak per week heeft u gemiddeld genomen persoonlijk contact met personen die betrokken zijn bij het initiatief (het kan hier gaan om mede-initiatiefnemers of professionals, maar ook om vrijwilligers die zo nu en dan komen helpen)?

☐ - - - - -

Hoeveel uur per week besteedt u gemiddeld aan het initiatief?

☐ - - - - -

Welke typering omschrijft uw initiatief het beste?

- ☐ Onderling en met de buitenwereld vindt weinig contact plaats
- ☐ Onderling weinig contact maar veel contact met de buitenwereld
- ☐ Onderling veel contact maar weinig contact met de buitenwereld
- ☐ Onderling en met de buitenwereld wordt veel contact onderhouden

Is de overheid betrokken bij het initiatief?

- ☐ Ja
- ☐ Nee

Op wat voor manier is de overheid betrokken bij het initiatief?

	Gemeente	Provincie	Beide	Niet van toepassing
Financiële middelen/subsidies verstrekken	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Ondersteuning door het leveren van goederen	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Door inzetten van professionals	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Het bieden van ingangen bij relevante netwerken	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Toegang geven tot relevante kennis	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Anders, namelijk:

****Hoe wordt het initiatief gefinancierd? Kunt u aangeven in % hoeveel het type financiering van het gehele budget uitmaakt:**

(Verdeel in totaal 100 %)

Crowdfunding	_____ %
Sponsoren	_____ %
Eigen inleg	_____ %
Subsidie gemeente	_____ %
Subsidie provincie	_____ %
Anders	_____ %

Ontvangt het initiatief ondersteuning vanuit de gemeenschap (bijv. door donaties, reclame of inzet door vrijwilligers)?

☐ Nee

Ja, in de volgende vorm:

Wie heeft het meest de regie of zeggenschap over het initiatief?

- ☐ Ik/Wij, de initiatiefnemer(s)
- ☐ Het dorp
- ☐ Meerdere dorpen
- ☐ De gemeente
- ☐ De provincie
- ☐ De professional die betrokken is bij het initiatief

Anders, namelijk:

In hoeverre zou u uw eigen initiatief als succesvol omschrijven?

1 - heel
onsuccesvol

2

3

4

5 - heel succesvol

☐

☐

☐

☐

☐

Welke factoren helpen om uw initiatief tot een succes te maken? Er zijn meerdere antwoorden mogelijk.

Welke factoren staan het succes van uw initiatief in de weg? Er zijn meerdere antwoorden mogelijk.

Wanneer bent u (met uw mede-initiatiefnemers) tevreden over het initiatief?

- ☐ Als het initiatief goed draait
- ☐ Als het initiatief haar doelen heeft bereikt
- ☐ We zijn al tevreden
- ☐ We zijn nooit tevreden

Hoe schat u de (naams)bekendheid van het initiatief in op een schaal van 1 tot 5?

1 behalve de actief
betrokken
personen kent
niemand het
initiatief

2

3

4

5 het hele
dorp/de hele regio
kent het initiatief

☐☐☐☐☐

De voorgaande vragen gingen specifiek over uw initiatief, deze vraag gaat over initiatieven in het algemeen. Kunt u aangeven welke factoren u bepalend vindt voor het succes van een initiatief?

	1 - helemaal niet van belang voor succes	2	3 - neutraal	4	5 - van groot belang voor succes	weet niet
Looptijd van het initiatief (duur)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Representati ef voor de buurt/het dorp	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Mensen uit de omgeving die ook meedoen	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Zichtbaarhei d van het initiatief binnen het dorp	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Zichtbaarhei d van het initiatief buiten het dorp	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Ontvangen van subsidie	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Zelfvoorzien endheid (geen financiële hulp van buitenaf)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Formele organisatiev orm (bijv. stichting of vereniging)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Ondersteuni ng overheid	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Dragen verantwoord elijkheid door initiatiefnem ers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Doelen bereiken	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Levering van een dienst	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sociaal kapitaal (voldoende vaardighede n, kennis en netwerk in het initiatief)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Ontwikkelin g van vaardighede n	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Onderling vertrouwen	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Regie bij initiatiefnem ers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Activiteiten binnen het initiatief staat boven het behalen van doelen	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Geen schade toebrengen aan omgeving	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Een stimulans zijn voor het ontstaan van nieuwe initiatieven	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Kunt u op een schaal van 1 tot 5 (1 = zeer onbelangrijk, 5 = zeer belangrijk) aangeven in hoeverre de volgende motivaties voor u een rol spelen om actief te zijn voor het initiatief?

	1 - zeer onbelangrijk	2	3 - neutraal	4	5 - zeer belangrijk
Mogelijkheid samen met anderen iets te doen	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Ik doe graag iets voor anderen	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Buurt beter leren kennen	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Een rolmodel zijn voor anderen	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Waardering krijgen van andere mensen	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Niemand anders kon het doen	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Ik wilde geen nee zeggen	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Bijdrage leveren aan oplossen van problemen van de buurt	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Iets doen waar ik invloed op heb	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Mogelijkheid om het dorp of regio te beïnvloeden	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Mogelijkheid om iets nieuws te leren	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Probleem rond
mijn huis
oplossen waar
ik last van heb

☐☐☐☐☐

Ik maak zelf
gebruik van de
voorziening

☐☐☐☐☐

Mijn plicht als
burger

☐☐☐☐☐

De gemeente
helpen

☐☐☐☐☐

Anders, namelijk:

Wat levert het bijdragen aan het initiatief uzelf op? (meerdere antwoorden mogelijk)

- ☐ Plezier in de werkzaamheden
- ☐ Iets kunnen bereiken
- ☐ Het uitbreiden van mijn netwerk
- ☐ Het uitbreiden van mijn vaardigheden
- ☐ Het gebruik kunnen maken van het product dat het initiatief oplevert

Anders, namelijk:

Zijn er personen die betrokken waren bij het initiatief gestopt met hun werkzaamheden?

Ja

☐

Nee

☐

Stel dat u zou stoppen met uw werkzaamheden voor het initiatief, denkt u dat uw werkzaamheden door iemand anders zouden worden opgepakt en overgenomen?

Ja

☐

Nee

☐

Zou u willen stoppen met uw werkzaamheden voor het initiatief?

- ☐ Ja, op korte termijn
- ☐ Ja, binnen een paar jaar
- ☐ Nee, ik denk er niet aan

Wat zouden voor u redenen kunnen zijn om te stoppen met het initiatief? Op een schaal van 1 tot 5 (1 = zeer onbelangrijk, 5 = zeer belangrijk)

	1 - zeer onbelangrijk	2	3 - neutraal	4	5 - zeer belangrijk
Het doel is behaald	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Tijdgebrek	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Te lang betrokken bij het initiatief	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Conflict	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Niet meer leuk/niet meer gemotiveerd	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Geen energie meer voor	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Noodzaak/aanleiding is er niet meer	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Geen opvolger(s)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Er zijn opvolgers die activiteiten overnemen	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Anders, namelijk:

Als u zou stoppen met het initiatief, wie zou uw werkzaamheden op moeten pakken volgens u?

Hoe lang verwacht u dat het initiatief blijft bestaan? Het gaat hier om uw eigen inschatting.

Nog 1 jaar

1 tot 3 jaar

3 tot 5 jaar

Langer dan 5 jaar

☐
☐
☐
☐

Stel dat alle betrokkenen ophouden met hun werkzaamheden voor het initiatief, vindt u dat het initiatief dan moet worden voortgezet?

Ja

Nee

☐
☐

Stel dat alle betrokkenen zouden stoppen met het initiatief, door wie zouden de werkzaamheden overgenomen moeten worden?

Stel dat alle betrokkenen zouden stoppen met het initiatief, wie is verantwoordelijk voor het toezien op de voortzetting van het initiatief?

In hoeverre voelt u zich verantwoordelijk voor het behalen van de doelen van het initiatief?

1 - helemaal niet
verantwoordelijk

2

3 - neutraal

4

5 - helemaal
verantwoordelijk

☐☐☐☐☐

Hoeveel mannen en hoeveel vrouwen zijn ongeveer betrokken bij het initiatief?

Mannen

Vrouwen

**Wat is (ongeveer) de gemiddelde leeftijd van de personen die betrokken zijn bij het initiatief?
In welke categorie valt de leeftijd gemiddeld van de personen betrokken bij het initiatief?**

- ☐ 18-30
- ☐ 30-50
- ☐ 50-65
- ☐ 65+

Opmerking: het is niet erg als u niet van iedereen de exacte leeftijd weet, het gaat hier om een benadering.

Onder sociaal kapitaal wordt verstaan de toegang die iemand heeft tot bepaalde hulpmiddelen zoals inhoudelijke kennis, vaardigheden of sociaal netwerk. Kunt u aangeven hoe groot het sociaal kapitaal binnen het initiatief is?

- ☐ 1 - helemaal geen sociaal kapitaal
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3 - neutraal
- ☐ 4
- ☐ 5 - veel sociaal kapitaal

Bestaat het initiatief vooral uit personen die al langer in de regio wonen (locals) of personen die onlangs naar de regio toe zijn verhuisd (nieuwkomers)

Locals _____ %

Nieuwkomers _____ %

Kunt u aangeven wat over het algemeen het opleidingsniveau is van de personen betrokken bij het initiatief?

Lager onderwijs _____ personen

Middelbaar onderwijs _____ personen

Hoger onderwijs _____ personen

Zijn alle benodigde vaardigheden en kennis in huis van het initiatief?

Ja

☐

Nee

☐

Waar worden de benodigde vaardigheden en kennis vandaan gehaald?

Is er binnen het initiatief iemand die duidelijk de leiding heeft of op zich neemt?

Ja

☐

Nee

☐

**Kent u in uw omgeving nog andere lokale burgerinitiatieven, al dan niet meer actief?
(vergelijkbaar met waar u actief in bent?)**

☐ Nee

Ja, namelijk:

**Zouden wij in de toekomst in het kader van dit onderzoek eventueel nogmaals contact met u
mogen opnemen voor verdere informatie over het bewonersinitiatief?**

☐ Nee

Ja, via (naam + emailadres)

Indien u kans wilt maken op een van de vvv-bonnen, vult u dan hier uw e-mailadres in

Dit waren alle vragen, hartelijk bedankt voor uw tijd!

English summary

Introduction

Participation of citizens in the public domain is something of all times. However, in the current context of austerity measures, economic crises, market failure and the phasing out of the welfare state, there is more attention for different forms of participation than before. The Dutch government is striving for a 'participation society' in which citizens have the opportunity and are expected to take on more responsibilities for their living environment. The transition to the 'participation society' is accompanied by changes in role patterns, responsibilities and power relations between citizens and governments.

In the context of the 'participation society', citizens' initiatives can be seen as an alternative to maintaining services that were previously provided by governments and social organizations. Particularly in depopulating areas, citizens' initiatives could contribute to setting up new services or to maintaining services that would otherwise disappear.

In this dissertation I study citizens' initiatives in depopulating areas in the three northern provinces of the Netherlands. The focus here is on the concepts of success, failure and continuity. The perspectives of various stakeholders, such as residents and governments, have a central place in the analyses. The following main question will be dealt with: *How can citizens' initiatives be described and understood in terms of success, failure and continuity in its local context of depopulation in rural areas?* In order to answer this question, the following research questions are addressed:

1. How can the success and failure of citizens' initiatives be defined?
2. Which factors contribute to the success and failure of citizens' initiatives?
3. Which factors influence the continuity of citizens' initiatives?
4. Which processes contribute to the failure of citizens' initiatives?

Success and the role of achieving concrete goals

In Chapter 2, I investigate how the concepts of 'success' and 'failure' are defined by professionals (research question 1). Based on focus group discussions, professionals, such as local and regional government officials, have given their views on when a citizens' initiative is considered successful or not. This chapter presents a model of success derived from theory that distinguishes success at three different levels: community, network and organisation/participants. Success at the community level relates to the results of an initiative and thus the contribution it makes to the community. At the network level, success means maintaining and expanding relationships with other organisations. Finally, success at the

organisational or participant level refers to the benefits that participating in an initiative brings to the participant. A successful citizens' initiative should be successful at all three levels.

The perspective of the professionals produced a somewhat romantic picture of citizens' initiatives. It is striking that the achievement of the objectives of the initiative is not considered the most important. On the contrary, an initiative is seen as successful by the professionals when the participants are active and in control of their initiative. The professionals mainly emphasize the importance of the process, in particular the importance of success at the organisational or participant level. This result is striking because citizens' initiatives in the participation society are expected, among other things, to be able to replace services where they disappear or are under pressure. However, the results in this dissertation show that such a focus on success at the community level, i.e. achieving goals and therefore also maintaining services, is not supported from the perspective of the professionals.

Chapter 3 discusses the perspective of initiators on success. A questionnaire is used to analyse the levels at which initiators approach success (research question 1). The results show that the initiators include all three levels of success from chapter 2 in their definition. The emphasis is placed by the initiators on achieving goals. This falls under success at community level. The focus on achieving goals increases when it comes to the success of the own initiative. It should be noted, however, that goals can change over time and not achieving an initial goal can lead to success at a later point in time.

Chapter 3 also discusses the second research question. The accompanying literature study shows that there is a particular focus on success factors. Four categories can be distinguished: characteristics of the initiative, functional success, social relationships and input. In the questionnaire, these categories of success factors were discussed and there was room for a fifth category in which the initiators could mention success or failure factors that had not previously emerged in the literature. The regression analysis of the questionnaire data shows that success and failure factors can be classified in the categories mentioned. Only in the category 'social relations' no success and failure factors emerge. Success is influenced by characteristics of the initiative, such as group size, development phase and communication levels. Input, such as the relationship with governments, for example in the field of subsidies, also plays a role. The suggestions of the respondents resulted in two failure factors: lack of financial resources and disappointing contacts with the government. The extent to which goals have been achieved at that moment appears to be the most important factor influencing success within the category of functional success. This once again indicates the strong dependence of success on achieving goals from the initiators' perspective.

Continuity and the process of failure

The continuity of citizens' initiatives is discussed in Chapter 4 (research question 3). Continuity can be approached at three different levels: the participants, group and initiative level. At the participant level, continuity means that the individual participants are continuously involved in the initiative. A group can also be continuous, if the group is stable and none of the participants withdraws. This is referred to as continuity at group level. Continuity at initiative level means a higher form of continuity. This is the case if the initiative continues to exist, despite possible changes in the composition of the group, until the goal is reached.

The analysis of the questionnaires shows that continuity is mainly considered at the initiative level. Continuity is mainly related to the extent to which a goal has been achieved. The degree to which goals have been achieved has a positive influence on the likelihood that an initiative will continue. The results show that continuity is not strongly related to the failure of participants or the entire group of participants. This result seems to refute the assumption that citizens' initiatives can be vulnerable if they provide an alternative form of services within the 'participation society'.

Finally, Chapter 5 discusses the process that takes place in the event of the failure of a citizens' initiative (research question 4). Instead of focusing on 'individual' failure factors, an integrated approach is used in which failure is seen as a process with various factors that can interact. Six possible obstacles to citizens' initiatives were identified from the literature: not being representative of the community, volunteer burn-out, scale issues, insufficient financial resources, the relationship with the government and existing and changing policy. On the basis of three case studies of initiatives that saw themselves as unsuccessful, the perspectives of both the initiators and the professionals involved are included in the analysis of the failure process. The analysis of the cases reveals three themes within the failure process: (1) interaction with government and institutions, (2) appropriation and (3) personal investments.

The results show that with regard to the first theme, interaction with the government and institutions, shifting responsibilities can lead to various discrepancies, among other things in the pace that an initiative wants to maintain. These discrepancies contribute to the process that can lead to the failure of the initiative. Within the second theme, appropriation, it appears that the initiators do not always succeed in appropriating the initiative. Responsibilities are often shared with the government and in some cases the interests are opposing each other. The results of the third theme, personal investments, illustrate how initiators invest their time, energy and reputation in their initiative. Although these investments are large, there is no question of volunteer burn-out within these cases. The disadvantages of the personal investments do emerge, for example social or reputation damage, if the initiative's failure is attributed to the initiators. An important part of the failure

process appears to be discrepancy in scale. Citizens' initiatives operate at the local level but have to do business with governments and other institutions that operate at higher levels of scale.

Conclusions and policy implications

Governments, professionals and initiators all have their own view of the function of citizens' initiatives, such as providing a service or contributing to social cohesion. These divergent views can be an obstacle to the functioning of citizens' initiatives. Citizens' initiatives benefit from professionals who understand which function the initiative is trying to fulfil.

If citizens' initiatives are seen as a long-term solution in the provision of services, it is also important to consider that there will be areas where fewer or no initiatives arise. As a result, leaving services to citizens' initiatives can lead to more inequality. However, attempts to prevent this kind of inequality by means of top-down provision of services do not fit in well with the idea behind the 'participation society' and the current form of citizens' initiatives.

This dissertation presents five recommendations for policy that may possibly contribute to facilitating citizens' initiatives: developing a better understanding of the function of citizens' initiatives, providing a safety net function where initiatives are lacking, communication of limitations and boundaries, minimalizing social damage and a consideration of scale differences. The 'participation society' has created a new situation for governments and professionals: citizens' initiatives arise, also in depopulating rural areas, and they pursue their own goals and claim a share of government budgets. Governments and professionals in particular will have to respond to this and adjust to the needs of citizens' initiatives.

Nederlandse samenvatting

Introductie

Participatie van burgers in het publieke domein is iets van alle tijden. Echter, in de huidige context van bezuinigingen, economische crises, marktfalen en de afbouw van de verzorgingsstaat is er meer aandacht voor de verschillende vormen van participatie dan vroeger. Vanuit de Nederlandse overheid wordt een ‘participatiesamenleving’ nagestreefd waarin burgers de mogelijkheid hebben en van ze wordt verwacht om meer verantwoordelijkheden op zich te nemen voor hun leefomgeving. De overgang naar de ‘participatiesamenleving’ gaat gepaard met veranderingen in rolpatronen, verantwoordelijkheden en machtsverhoudingen tussen burgers en overheden.

In de context van de participatiesamenleving kunnen burgerinitiatieven gezien worden als een alternatief voor het in stand houden van voorzieningen, die tot dan toe door overheden en maatschappelijke organisaties verzorgd werden. Met name in gebieden met bevolkingsafname, zouden burgerinitiatieven kunnen bijdragen aan het opzetten van nieuwe voorzieningen of aan het in stand houden van voorzieningen die anders zouden verdwijnen.

In dit proefschrift onderzoek ik burgerinitiatieven in krimpgebieden in de drie noordelijke provincies van Nederland. Hierbij ligt de focus op de begrippen succes, falen en continuïteit. De perspectieven van verschillende stakeholders, zoals bewoners en overheden, hebben een centrale plaats in de analyses. De volgende hoofdvraag staat centraal: *Hoe kunnen burgerinitiatieven beschreven en begrepen worden met betrekking tot succes, falen en continuïteit binnen de lokale context van rurale bevolkingskrimp?* Om deze vraag te beantwoorden zijn vier onderzoeksvragen opgesteld:

1. Hoe kunnen succes en falen van burgerinitiatieven gedefinieerd worden?
2. Welke factoren dragen bij aan het succes en falen van burgerinitiatieven?
3. Welke factoren zijn van invloed op de continuïteit van burgerinitiatieven?
4. Welke processen dragen bij aan het falen van burgerinitiatieven?

Succes en de rol van het bereiken van concrete doelen

In Hoofdstuk 2 onderzoek ik hoe de begrippen ‘succes’ en ‘falen’ gedefinieerd worden door professionals (onderzoeksvraag 1). Aan de hand van focusgroep discussies hebben de professionals, zoals gemeente- en provincieambtenaren, hun visie gegeven op wanneer een burgerinitiatief succesvol wordt gevonden of niet. In dit hoofdstuk wordt een uit de theorie afgeleid model van succes gepresenteerd dat onderscheid maakt in succes op drie verschillende niveaus: gemeenschaps-, netwerk- en organisatie/deelnemers-niveau. Succes op het gemeenschapsniveau

heeft betrekking op de resultaten van een initiatief en daarmee de bijdrage die het aan de gemeenschap levert. Op het netwerkniveau houdt succes in het onderhouden en uitbreiden van relaties met andere instanties. Tot slot, succes op het organisatie- of deelnemers niveau verwijst naar de voordelen die het deelnemen aan een initiatief oplevert voor de deelnemer. Een succesvol burgerinitiatief zou op al deze drie niveaus succesvol moeten zijn.

Het perspectief van de professionals heeft een ietwat romantisch beeld van burgerinitiatieven opgeleverd. Opvallend was dat het bereiken van de doelen van het initiatief niet als meest belangrijk werd geacht. In tegendeel, een initiatief werd door de professionals als succesvol gezien wanneer de deelnemers actief waren en de regie hadden over hun initiatief. De professionals benadrukten vooral het belang van het proces, met name dus het belang van succes op organisatie- of deelnemersniveau. Dit resultaat is opvallend te noemen omdat van burgerinitiatieven in de participatiesamenleving juist wordt verwacht dat zij, onder meer, voorzieningen kunnen vervangen waar deze wegvallen of onder druk staan. De resultaten in dit proefschrift laten echter zien dat een dergelijke focus op succes op het gemeenschapsniveau, te weten het bereiken van doelen en dus ook het in stand houden van voorzieningen, niet wordt ondersteund vanuit het perspectief van de professionals.

In Hoofdstuk 3 komt het perspectief van initiatiefnemers op succes aan bod. Aan de hand van een vragenlijst is geanalyseerd op welke niveaus initiatiefnemers succes benaderen (onderzoeksvraag 1). De resultaten laten zien dat de initiatiefnemers alle drie niveaus van succes uit hoofdstuk 2 meenemen in hun definiëring. De nadruk wordt door de initiatiefnemers gelegd op het behalen van doelen. Dit valt onder succes op gemeenschapsniveau. De focus op het behalen van doelen wordt groter wanneer het gaat om het succes van het eigen initiatief. Hierbij dient wel te worden opgemerkt dat doelen kunnen veranderen in de loop van de tijd en het niet behalen van een initieel doel kan wel succes op een later moment opleveren.

Hoofdstuk 3 gaat daarnaast ook in op de tweede onderzoeksvraag. De bijbehorende literatuurstudie laat zien dat er vooral een focus is op succesfactoren. Daarin kunnen vier categorieën worden onderscheiden: eigenschappen van het initiatief, functioneel succes, sociale relaties en input. In de vragenlijst kwamen deze categorieën van succesfactoren aan bod en was er ruimte voor een vijfde categorie waarin de initiatiefnemers succes- of faalfactoren konden noemen die nog niet eerder in de literatuur naar voren zijn gekomen. De regressieanalyse van de vragenlijstdata laat zien dat succes- en faalfactoren in de genoemde categorieën onder te brengen zijn. Alleen in de categorie 'sociale relaties' komen geen succes- en faalfactoren naar voren. Succes wordt beïnvloed door eigenschappen van het initiatief, zoals groepsgrootte, ontwikkelingsfase en communicatieniveaus. Ook de input, zoals de relatie met overheden, bijvoorbeeld op het gebied van subsidies, speelt een rol. De suggesties van de respondenten hebben twee faalfactoren opgeleverd: gebrek aan financiële middelen en teleurstellende contacten met de

overheid. De mate waarin doelen op dat moment bereikt zijn blijkt de belangrijkste factor van invloed op succes te zijn binnen de categorie functioneel succes. Dit duidt nogmaals de sterke afhankelijkheid van succes op het bereiken van doelen aan, vanuit het perspectief van de initiatiefnemers.

Continuïteit en falen als proces

De continuïteit van burgerinitiatieven komt aan bod in Hoofdstuk 4 (onderzoeksvraag 3). Continuïteit kan op drie verschillende niveaus worden benaderd: het deelnemers-, groeps- en initiatief niveau. Op het deelnemersniveau houdt continuïteit in dat de individuele deelnemers zonder onderbreking betrokken zijn bij het initiatief. Ook een groep kan continu zijn, als de groep stabiel is en geen van de deelnemers zich terugtrekt, dus continuïteit op groepsniveau. Continuïteit op initiatief niveau houdt een hogere vorm van continuïteit in. Dat is het geval als het initiatief blijft voortbestaan, ondanks mogelijke wijzigingen in de samenstelling van de groep, totdat het doel is bereikt.

De analyse van de vragenlijsten laat zien dat continuïteit vooral wordt beschouwd op het initiatief niveau. Continuïteit wordt met name gerelateerd aan de mate waarin het doel van het initiatief wordt bereikt. De mate waarin doelen zijn bereikt heeft een positieve invloed op de kans dat een initiatief continueert. De uitkomsten laten zien dat continuïteit niet sterk gerelateerd wordt aan het uitvallen van deelnemers of de volledige groep van deelnemers. Dit resultaat lijkt de veronderstelling te weerleggen dat burgerinitiatieven kwetsbaar kunnen zijn als een alternatieve vorm van voorzieningen verzorgen binnen de participatiesamenleving.

Tot slot gaat Hoofdstuk 5 in op het proces dat zich afspeelt bij het falen van een burgerinitiatief (onderzoeksvraag 4). In plaats van een focus op 'losse' faalfactoren is een integrale benadering gehanteerd waarbij falen als een proces wordt gezien met verschillende factoren die kunnen interacteren. Vanuit de literatuur zijn 6 mogelijke obstakels voor burgerinitiatieven geïdentificeerd: niet representatief zijn voor de gemeenschap, vrijwilligers burn-out, schaal kwesties, onvoldoende financiële middelen, de relatie met de overheid en bestaand en veranderend beleid. Aan de hand van drie casestudies van initiatieven die zichzelf als niet-succesvol zagen, zijn de perspectieven van zowel de initiatiefnemers als de betrokken professionals meegenomen in de analyse van het faalproces. Uit de analyse van de cases kwamen drie thema's binnen het faalproces naar voren: (1) interactie met de overheid en instanties, (2) toe-eigening en (3) persoonlijke investeringen.

De resultaten laten zien dat met betrekking op het eerste thema, interactie met de overheid en instanties, het verschuiven van verantwoordelijkheden kan leiden tot verschillende discrepanties, onder meer in het tempo dat het initiatief wil aanhouden. Deze discrepanties dragen bij aan het proces dat tot falen van het initiatief kan leiden. Binnen het tweede thema, toe-eigening, blijkt dat het de

initiatiefnemers niet altijd lukt om het initiatief zich toe te eigenen. Verantwoordelijkheden worden vaak gedeeld met de overheid en in sommige gevallen staan de belangen tegenover elkaar. De resultaten van het derde thema, persoonlijke investeringen, illustreren hoe initiatiefnemers hun tijd, energie en reputatie investeren in hun initiatief. Ondanks dat deze investeringen groot zijn, is er geen sprake van vrijwilligers burn-out binnen deze cases. De nadelen van de persoonlijke investeringen komt wel naar voren, bijvoorbeeld sociale of reputatie schade wanneer het niet slagen van het initiatief de initiatiefnemers wordt aangerekend. Een belangrijk onderdeel van het faalproces blijkt discrepantie in schaalniveau te zijn. Burgerinitiatieven opereren op het lokale niveau maar moeten zaken doen met overheden en andere instanties die op hogere schaalniveaus opereren.

Conclusies en beleidsimplicaties

Overheden, professionals en initiatiefnemers hebben allen hun eigen kijk op de functie van burgerinitiatieven, zoals het leveren van een dienst of het bijdragen aan sociale cohesie. Deze uiteenlopende meningen kunnen een obstakel zijn voor het functioneren van burgerinitiatieven. Burgerinitiatieven zijn namelijk gebaat bij professionals die begrijpen welke functie het initiatief probeert te vervullen.

Wanneer burgerinitiatieven als lange-termijn oplossing worden gezien in het leveren van voorzieningen, dan is het ook belangrijk om in ogenschouw te nemen dat er gebieden zullen zijn waar minder of geen initiatieven ontstaan. Hierdoor kan het overlaten van voorzieningen aan burgerinitiatieven leiden tot meer ongelijkheid. Echter, pogingen om dit soort ongelijkheid te voorkomen door middel van top-down leveren van voorzieningen past minder goed bij de gedachte achter de ‘participatiesamenleving’ en de huidige vorm van burgerinitiatieven.

In dit proefschrift worden vijf aanbevelingen voor beleid aangedragen die mogelijk kunnen bijdragen aan het faciliteren van burgerinitiatieven: ontwikkelen van begrip voor de verschillende functies van burgerinitiatieven, een vangnet vormen wanneer er geen of weinig initiatieven ontstaan, communicatie over beperkingen en grenzen, beperken van sociale schade en oog voor verschillende schaalniveaus. De ‘participatiesamenleving’ heeft een nieuwe situatie opgeleverd voor overheden en professionals: burgerinitiatieven ontstaan, zo ook in de rurale krimpgebieden, en ze streven hun eigen doelen na en maken aanspraak op overheidsbudgetten. Met name overheden en professionals zullen hierop moeten reageren en inspelen op de behoeften van burgerinitiatieven.

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